

Craft in the age of climate crisis

**Climate resilience through craft:
A path to sustainable fashion in India**

Stakeholder insights report

October 2023



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“Artisans have the power to transform the dynamics of production and consumption, crafting a vital response to the climate crisis, as well as contributing to a more open and equitable society.”

- Carry Somers, co-founder, Fashion Revolution

Partners

About British Council

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About Fashion Revolution India

[Fashion Revolution India](http://www.fashionrevolution.org) is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to advocating for a clean, safe, fair, transparent, and accountable fashion industry. As part of the global [Fashion Revolution](http://www.fashionrevolution.org) movement spanning over 75 countries, Fashion Revolution India envisions a fashion industry that prioritises the conservation and restoration of the environment while valuing the well-being of people over growth and profit. Fashion Revolution was founded in the wake of the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013 and has grown into the world's largest fashion activism movement uniting citizens, industry stakeholders, and policymakers. Our organisation drives change through education, research, and advocacy work.

www.fashionrevolution.org

Photo credit : Shruti Singh



About Crafting Futures

The British Council's Crafting Futures programme in India brings together Indian and UK partners to collaborate on projects which explore new futures for crafts. Since 2019, Crafting Futures has supported nine groundbreaking collaborations across the two nations' industry and academia, to explore different possible directions for artisan economies. In 2022/ 23 British Council commissioned Crafting Connections – a series of consultations with stakeholders across the value chain of craft, in collaboration with Fashion Revolution India, to bring light to the connection between crafts, climate crisis and the potential to inspire a climate positive fashion and textile industry.



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‘Climate change is impacting the traditional crafts sector in unimaginable ways. In India the thriving weaving sector, be it in Assam, West Bengal, Gujarat Tamil Nadu, Kerala or elsewhere are predominantly placed in areas prone to natural calamities and have faced severe impact of floods and cyclones majorly in the past decade. The looming threat of the changing climate - erratic rainfall, cyclones and heatwave all impact various processes as well in the entire supply chain from fibre to preloom activities. The impact is such that many of the practices may become extinct if the right intervention is not brought in.’

- Alpi Boylla, Director, Save the Loom



Table of contents

Acknowledgements	08
Foreword	09
I. Introduction	12
01. Understanding the interplay of craft and climate crisis	12
02. Research purpose	13
03. Our journey exploring craft in the age of climate crisis	14
II. Key findings: craft, climate crisis and sustainable fashion	18
04. Interwoven threads of craft and fashion	18
05. The roots of craft: indigenous wisdom and inherent sustainability	23
06. Impact of climate change on craft ecosystems and indigenous communities	25
07. Craft as a catalyst for sustainable fashion	27
III. Pathways to sustainable fashion: overcoming barriers and accelerating change	35
08. Technology and innovation	36
09. Heritage materials and innovation	40
10. Research	44
11. Ecosystem for craftspeople and craft led-enterprises	46
12. Advocacy and policy	49
13. Development funds and investment	52
IV. Recommendations	58
14. Stakeholder aspirations: crafting the future together	58
15. Crafted revolution: a roadmap for change	59
IV. Conclusion	61
V. Postscript	
16. Stakeholders and contributors	62
17. Glossary	66
18. References	67
19. Dialogues from roundtables	69

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It is our aspiration and hope that the dialogues presented in this report serve as a catalyst, igniting meaningful conversations and propelling impactful actions on the ground. These collective efforts have set a powerful foundation for positive change, and for that, we are truly thankful.

On behalf of the Fashion Revolution India team

Shruti Singh, Country Head
Fashion Revolution India



Foreword

From the British Council

In the face of an escalating global climate crisis, we stand at a historic crossroad. With this report 'Craft in the age of climate crisis: climate resilience through craft', the British Council together with our partner Fashion Revolution India, is honoured to present a beacon of hope amid the challenges we confront. The report delves into the intersection of climate change and the realm of craft – a space where tradition, culture, and climate resilience converge. It acknowledges the harsh reality of climate change that disproportionately impacts India, a nation renowned for its diverse tradition of craftsmanship.

However, this report is more than a compendium of challenges; it is a testament to human resilience and ingenuity. It unveils the effects of climate change on our artisans, whose lives are intricately woven with the natural world. Yet, amid adversity, a compelling narrative of opportunity emerges. This report reveals how craft can serve as a potent climate solution. Artisans, deeply rooted to their connection with the environment, have practised sustainability, circular economies, and environmental stewardship for generations. They transform natural materials into intricate works of art, reduce waste through ingenious techniques, and champion renewable resources. The report outlines critical areas for intervention needed for a sustainable craft ecosystem, offering a strategic roadmap for diverse stakeholders.

Furthermore, the report celebrates the best practices of Indian artisans and organisations already leading the way in sustainable crafts. These real-world examples demonstrate that a sustainable future is not a distant vision – it is already taking shape in the hands of artisans and creative practitioners. In conclusion, this report is a call to action. It urges us to recognise the inherent value of craft in the sustainability agenda. It beckons a movement that encourages innovation and technology while honouring our indigenous communities and our planet.

Our deepest gratitude is extended to all who contributed to this report. Their unwavering commitment to crafting a sustainable future is an inspiration to us all.

**Alison Barett, Country Director India, and
Delphine Pawlik, Deputy Director Arts India
British Council**

From Fashion Revolution India

In the age of the climate crisis, where our planet faces unprecedented challenges, the role of traditional crafts in India takes on a new and profound significance. For centuries, Indian artisans have woven a rich tapestry of culture, heritage, and craftsmanship. Their creations have not only been objects of beauty but also repositories of sustainable practices, passed down through generations.

Today, as the spectre of climate change looms large, we find ourselves at a critical juncture. The urgent need for sustainable living and responsible consumption has never been more apparent. In this context, the world is turning towards traditional crafts as a beacon of hope. India, with its diverse and vibrant artisanal traditions, has a pivotal role to play in this global movement.

As Shruti Singh explores the interplay between craft and climate in this report, we will journey through the stories of artisans who are adapting age-old techniques to modern challenges. We will witness the revival of dying crafts, the innovative use of renewable resources, and the fusion of traditional wisdom with contemporary design. These stories, from the heart of India's villages to the bustling metropolises, highlight the resilience of artisans and their commitment to crafting a sustainable future.

In a world threatened by environmental degradation, the preservation and promotion of India's craft heritage emerges as a powerful force for change. This report invites you to delve deep into this captivating world, where tradition meets innovation and the timeless artistry of Indian crafts offers a beacon of hope in the age of climate crisis. Within these pages, you will find inspiration, admiration, and a renewed appreciation for the profound wisdom and creativity embedded in the crafts of India, which are now more relevant than ever in our quest for a sustainable future. Let the journey begin.

**Suki Dusanj-Lenz, Founder
Fashion Revolution India**

I. Introduction

We are living in an era of unprecedented climate change. The Earth recorded its hottest day ever in July 2023, underlining the urgent need to address this swift progression of global warming, or as the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres phrases it, 'global boiling.' The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)¹ report warns us about the reality of the escalating global climate crisis.

The rise in global temperatures, evident worldwide with increasing sea levels, sudden floods, droughts, heatwaves, and forest fires, has an astounding impact on our lives, communities, and the planet. The impacts are notably visible in India, a nation recognised for its diverse heritage of crafts that range from textiles and pottery to metalwork and woodcraft. India, with a 4.7° celsius projected temperature rise by 2100 according to Climate Action Tracker 2023² stands among the nations most susceptible to climate change.



Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik



01. Understanding the interplay of craft and climate crisis

Craftspeople worldwide, who have relied on natural resources - locally sourced materials, water bodies, farms and forests to create their craft products, now face of unpredictable weather patterns, resource scarcity, and escalating material costs. Their livelihoods are intrinsically linked to environmental health, and climate changes exert a deep, direct impact on their craft, tradition, and survival.

It is also important to note that craft communities, despite being among those who contribute least to climate change, are also the most vulnerable to its impacts. Many artisan communities reside in climate-vulnerable regions, increasing their exposure to climate-induced disasters. Women are on the frontlines of climate change, facing disproportionate impacts due to entrenched social, economic, and cultural inequities.³

An overwhelming number of craft workers in India, estimated at around 200 million⁴, with women comprising 56.13 per cent of this demographic⁵, face varying degrees of risk from climate change, directly or indirectly.

Craftspeople also stand at the forefront of crafting solutions that pave the way for sustainable and slow fashion systems. A study by the World Craft Council in 2022⁶ states that artisanal crafts promote circular economies. They use and reuse materials within a community, thereby reducing waste and transportation emissions, and fostering principles of the circular economy and environmental sustainability. The Crafts Council UK's report⁷ on the circular economy highlights the fact that the deep connection craftspeople have with past traditions and the legacy they leave for future generations inherently integrates the regeneration of natural systems within their craft.

Indigenous communities, both in India and worldwide have long demonstrated a deep understanding of their local ecosystems, using available resources judiciously. Their knowledge extends beyond simple utility to the intricate relationships between humans, their craft, and the environment.

Traditional crafts are an integral part of the fashion and textile industry, a sector which is one of the biggest contributors to climate change and accounts for about ten per cent of global carbon emissions⁸. The fashion industry has an extensive water footprint, chemical usage and waste generation. The rise of fast fashion has magnified the sector's environmental impact, with new collections being released almost weekly or monthly. Now, more than ever, there is an urgent need for sustainable living and mindful consumption. Traditional crafts and indigenous knowledge hold significant promise to provide a roadmap for sustainable fashion.

These belief systems and practices promote sustainability, environmental stewardship, and the circular economy. Handloom fabrics have a low carbon footprint. It is estimated that for each piece of fabric crafted on a handloom, approximately one point one tonnes of Carbon Dioxide (CO₂)⁹ emissions are averted as compared to those produced on a power loom. Traditional crafts frequently utilise natural and locally sourced materials. They incorporate plant-based dyes, hand-spun fabrics, and water-efficient, regenerative materials such as bamboo. Additionally, crafts champion zero waste pattern making techniques and less waste generation. In West Bengal, Kantha embroidery involves the use of upcycled fabrics and saris. Worn-out clothes are repurposed and given new life through intricate embroidery, thereby reducing waste and promoting circularity. Kalamkari artists of India use vegetable dyes for their intricate textile artwork, and the Khatri community in Bhuj, Gujarat, known for their Ajrakh print, a traditional block-printing technique, use natural dyes derived from indigo, madder, turmeric, and more. Their practices are not just artistic expressions. They narrate tales of conservation, biodiversity, and resilience, thus exemplifying the sustainable values inherent in their work. In this report, we seek answers to the pivotal question:

‘Is there a role for our artisanal past in tackling the current environmental crisis in the fashion industry?’

02. Research purpose

The report seeks to address the following key areas:

1. **impact of the climate on craft and artisans:** Understanding how climate change affects the craft sector and the livelihoods of skilled artisans
2. **craft and slow fashion:** exploring how craft, with its natural sustainability and circular practices, can be a game-changer in fighting the environmental impacts of fast fashion
3. **unearthing climate solutions:** mapping existing fashion and textile brands, innovations, and initiatives that are tackling climate issues through craft.
4. **crafting a sustainable fashion future:** reimagining the role and potential of craft to unlock the goal of United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (UN SDG 12), 'Responsible consumption and production'. Can it be a key player in meeting the demand for ethical and eco-friendly fashion production?

This report aims to underline this urgency and advocate for a renewed focus on the symbiotic relationship between crafts, artisans, environment and the potential for reframing the sustainable fashion agenda. The report's aim is to inspire action for a stronger craft ecosystem that can play a crucial role in mitigating the impacts of climate change and in promoting responsible fashion value chains.



Stakeholder roundtable in Mumbai

Photo credit : Fashion Revolution India

03. Our journey exploring craft in the age of climate crisis

The British Council and Fashion Revolution India have been collaborating at the intersection of craft, fashion, and sustainability for many years. Our earlier Crafting Connections projects and dialogues with the ecosystem have given us deep insights into the evolving craft sector post-Covid-19. Dealing with one crisis after another, we recognized that climate change will be one of the most significant challenges ahead, requiring a deeper understanding to develop strategies that can effectively address it. We were curious to explore the interconnectedness of craft and climate, with an underlying focus on sustainable fashion and craft resilience.

Research methodology

The research was conducted from October 2022 to July 2023, employing a mixed-methods approach to collect data and gather insights from experts within the craft ecosystem. The methodology includes industry stakeholder roundtable consultations, field visits, and one-on-one interviews.

Industry stakeholder roundtable consultations:

Five stakeholder roundtables were conducted, bringing together experts, stakeholders, academics, and practitioners from the craft and fashion industries. These roundtables took place in different cities of India - New Delhi, Jaipur, Bengaluru, Guwahati, and Mumbai.

The roundtables were designed as workshops and discussions, focusing on specific interconnected sub-themes to explore the craft sector's vulnerabilities, the pivotal role of gender, potential climate change adaptations, alignment of slow fashion principles with traditional crafts, strategies to bridge investment gaps, promotion of education and innovation, as well as mapping both challenges and opportunities. In addition to traditional methods of facilitation, an interactive digital engagement tool was used during the discussions. It allowed us to capture responses to questions in real-time from all participants. This facilitated efficient data aggregation and analysis of critical questions, knowledge exchange and idea generation, and identification of common themes and patterns.



Photo credit : Fashion Revolution India



Photo credit : Fashion Revolution India

Participant groups:

The study involved various participant groups, including craft practitioners, entrepreneurs, professionals from the fashion and lifestyle industries, academics with expertise in crafts and climate-related fields, representatives from relevant non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), government officials, craft ecosystem enablers, and climate change experts. The list of participating stakeholders is included at the end of the report.

Field visits:

During the research, the British Council and Fashion Revolution India teams conducted field visits to interact with craft clusters, artisan entrepreneurs, material innovators, and slow fashion businesses. The purpose of these field visits was to gain a deeper understanding of the current landscape of climate impact on crafts through first-hand insights and identify best practices to highlight in the report.

We conducted field visits at 11.11, Brigitte Singh, Rangrez Creation, Tharangini Studio, Vimor Handloom Foundation, Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing, Baghara Traditional Dress making cluster, Howly Sericulture Farm in Assam.



Photo credit : Fashion Revolution India



Photo credit : Fashion Revolution India

One-on-one interviews:

While nationwide consultations formed the bedrock of our research, one-on-one interviews were conducted with select stakeholders to delve deeper into specific aspects of the study that required more in-depth information and insights.

Limitations and learnings

We encountered certain limitations that influenced our study's scope and applicability.

1. The focus on five cities and 160 stakeholders, while comprehensive, does not fully encompass the vast and diverse landscape of India's craft ecosystem.
2. A lack of comprehensive data exploring the direct impact of climate change on artisan communities presented challenges in fully understanding the extent of this influence.
3. While craft includes various sub-sectors and materials, our primary focus was on fashion, lifestyle, and textile-related crafts.
4. The scope of our project was bound by time constraints, which may have limited our ability to capture the full spectrum of the impact of climate change on crafts, as well as the breadth of solutions and challenges present in India's dynamic craft sector.
5. Our research faced a limitation in clearly distinguishing between the formal and informal economies in India. The sector is composed of many diverse production systems that range from individual home-based artisans to large manufacturing facilities. There is a need for further data-based research, given the vulnerability of the informal workforce.

As we navigate the ever-evolving landscape of craft sustainability within the context of the climate crisis, it becomes evident that this report serves as a starting point. While this report highlights the interplay between craft, sustainability, and the climate crisis through the lens of stakeholder perspectives, it is essential that we continue to explore and build upon these findings to develop a richer, and more comprehensive understanding of this complex field.

II. Key findings: craft, climate crisis and sustainable fashion

This chapter delves deeper into the interconnectedness of craft, fashion, and sustainability. It explores the fundamental essence of craft, the philosophical underpinnings upon which it is founded, and its contemporary relevance.

Furthermore, it unravels the inherent sustainability embedded within the craft ecosystem, emphasising its climate advantage and its potential to contribute to the growing slow fashion movement.




Photo credit : British Council



04. Interwoven threads of craft and fashion

With an estimated 200 million craftspeople,¹⁰ of which over 56 per cent are women,¹¹ India is home to a diverse craft sector that contributes significantly to its creative economy which encompasses various domains, including home products, textiles, fashion, jewellery, lifestyle goods, and decorative arts, among others.

The economic significance of India's handicraft sector cannot be overstated. According to the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO),¹² the handicraft sector contributes around 2 per cent to the gross domestic product (GDP) of India, translating to billions of dollars. It plays a crucial role in India's export industry, with the Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts (EPCH) reporting that India exported handloom products worth Rs. 1,693 crore (US\$ 229 million) during April 2021-February 2022.¹³ The India handicrafts market reached a size of US\$ 3.9 billion in 2022 and is projected to reach a staggering US\$ 6.2 billion by 2028,¹⁴ underscoring the escalating global demand for Indian crafts.

The focus of this report is on the intersection of craft with the fashion and textile industries, particularly emphasising the handloom and garment segments related to crafts. According to a report by Invest India, the Indian textile industry is the country's second-largest employer, directly providing jobs to 45 million individuals and supporting another 100 million in allied industries. India's contribution to the global textile and apparel trade is substantial, ranking it as the sixth-largest exporter worldwide. Valued at a staggering US\$100 billion,¹⁵ the industry is projected to scale to a valuation of US\$190 billion by 2025-26.¹⁶

What sets India apart in the global textile landscape is its unparalleled artisanal legacy. India accounts for a staggering 95 per cent share of the world's handmade textiles,¹⁷ including materials such as cotton, jute, and silk. Craftsmanship has always been at the core of the fashion industry. Artisans, skilled in their respective crafts, have contributed to the creation of clothing that not only serves a functional purpose but also tells stories, represents cultures, and reflects creativity. From handwoven textiles to intricate embroidery, craft traditions have played a vital role in shaping the fashion landscape.



Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik

Interwoven threads of craft and fashion

Raw material production: Artisans often engage in producing raw materials for fashion items. For example, in rural India, skilled spinners and weavers create hand-spun and handwoven textiles, such as Khadi cotton, which is sourced by ethical fashion brands.

Fabric production: This involves the creation of fabric from raw materials, and craft skills are essential in this process. Some examples include:

1. **spinning:** Artisans transform raw fibres into threads and yarns. For instance, hand spinning is used in the production of Khadi in India.
2. **weaving:** Craftsmen use handlooms to interlace threads, create fabric. Handloom weaving is prevalent in many countries including India, where it's used for making traditional fabrics like Muslin and Ikat.
3. **knitting/crocheting:** Some artisans use these techniques to produce fabric. Hand-knit wool from places like Ireland or hand-crocheted items from South America are well-known examples.

Surface design: This is the process of decorating the fabric surface, often enhancing the aesthetic appeal and value of the fabric. It is typically done post fabric production. Several craft techniques are used in surface design, including:

1. **block printing:** Artisans use carved wooden blocks to print patterns onto fabric. Techniques like Ajrakh and Dabu from India, and Batik from Indonesia, are renowned worldwide.
2. **embroidery:** Craftsmen embellish fabrics by sewing patterns onto them. This could range from the intricate Zardozi embroidery of India to the colourful Otomi embroidery of Mexico.
3. **dyeing:** Artisans colour fabrics using different techniques. Shibori from Japan and Bandhani from India are examples of resist-dyeing techniques that create patterned fabric.
4. **painting:** Some artisans hand-paint designs onto fabric, such as the Kalamkari painters in India, or the silk painters in China and Vietnam.

Garment production: In luxury and high-quality markets, handcrafted elements like hand embroidery, lacework, beading, and other artisanal techniques add value to garments. French couture houses often employ artisans for detailed work on their haute couture collections.

Final product embellishment: Many fashion items, including bags, shoes, and clothing, are adorned with artisanal craftwork. For example, artisans in Morocco create intricate hand-embroidery and beading that are incorporated into high-fashion pieces sold globally.

Accessory crafting: Craftsmanship also plays a significant role in accessory production. Be it handwoven baskets from Ghana, hand-beaded jewellery from Kenya, or leather goods from Italy, artisan skills are a cornerstone of the fashion accessory market.

Upcycling and repurposing: Craftspeople can play a role in creating circular fashion supply chains. Artisans can repurpose fashion waste into new products, such as using fabric scraps to create patchwork items or transforming used clothing into new fashion pieces.

The shift from fast to slow

India, as one of the world's largest fashion producers and consumers, holds a pivotal role in shaping a sustainable future aligned with the UN SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production. In recent decades, the fashion industry, among others like food and electronics, has succumbed to the allure of rapid, mass production. This era, characterised by the mantra of 'more, faster, cheaper', has fostered a culture of disposability over durability.

The shift from four fashion seasons a year to 52 seasons, and now the rise of ultra-fast fashion with new outfits being introduced to the market every day, has fuelled unprecedented consumption. However, this model is inherently flawed, rooted in the ceaseless extraction of raw materials, excessive energy consumption, and the generation of massive waste. It has led to environmental degradation and resource depletion. Traditionally, craftsmanship celebrated the concept of 'making less' - a stark contrast to today's fast fashion paradigm. This shift not only stripped communities of their cultural identity but also led to the degradation of ecosystems and the loss of sustainable methods that could have been crucial in preventing the climate crisis.



'We're on the cusp of massive change and craft could accelerate it.'

- Andrew Morlet, CEO Ellen MacArthur Foundation, UK

Today, the fashion industry alone is responsible for a staggering 10 per cent of global carbon emissions¹⁸. Fast fashion exacts an environmental toll through the depletion of non-renewable resources, greenhouse gas emissions, and the excessive use of water and energy. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) estimates that the emissions from textile manufacturing are set to surge by 60 per cent by 2030¹⁹.

As we grapple with the realities of climate change and dwindling resources, there's a growing global recognition that this model is unsustainable and needs to be fundamentally rethought. The call for sustainable fashion revolves around mindful consumption, purposeful resource utilisation, and a rejection of the fast fashion culture. It advocates for manufacturing that respects both people and the environment. The global shift in consumption patterns, driven by a heightened awareness of the environmental toll of our consumer-driven society, is particularly pronounced in the textile and craft industry. Consumers are transitioning from the allure of 'fast' to the thoughtful embrace of 'slow.'

In this evolving landscape, crafts offer a ray of hope as the world seeks sustainable and responsible fashion supply chains. As global consumers increasingly seek out unique, ethically-made, and sustainable fashion, the role of artisans and crafts within the fashion supply chain is poised for growth. This shift towards conscious consumption presents an opportunity to support local craft traditions, foster sustainable livelihoods, and mitigate environmental impacts. The words of Ashok Chatterjee resonate powerfully: 'Crafts are not just products; they are repositories of wisdom, culture, and sustainability. It is our responsibility to honour and nurture them for a more harmonious and sustainable world.'



'We are living in an era of ultra-fast fashion which values a culture of disposability over durability, prioritising the "outfit of the day (OOTD)" instead of timeless style or treasured keepsakes - it's all fast and fleeting'

- Shruti Singh, Country head, Fashion Revolution India

Driving forces behind the slow fashion revolution

1. **Generation Z's influence on the eco-conscious movement:** Born between 1995 and 2012, Generation Z makes up 26 per cent of the global population. Shaped by the digital age, environmental crises, economic upheavals, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, this generation is deeply committed to sustainability. McKinsey's research highlights their inclination towards 'conscious consumption,' with a significant 62 per cent preferring sustainable brands, even at a premium. However, a disconnect exists between their eco-values and actual buying behaviour, emphasising the need to align craft with their aspirations, making it both relevant and coveted to ensure that it becomes a driving force and not a passing fad.
2. **The rise of D2C and artisanal connections:** Young entrepreneurs leading MSMEs are navigating the Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) space, each driven by unique motivations but united in emphasising their brand's artisanal story. D2C, powered by digital advancements, allows craft businesses to directly engage with consumers, provide unparalleled control over product quality, supply chains, and foster closer customer relationships. This model not only facilitates invaluable feedback but also often yields higher profit margins compared to traditional retail systems.
3. **Legislative drive towards sustainable production:** Governments worldwide are implementing stringent regulations to curtail the environmental impact of production processes. These regulations advocate for renewable energy use, waste reduction, and the adoption of circular economy models. The move towards holding corporations responsible for the entire lifecycle of their products is evident in extended producer responsibility (EPR) programmes, with increased investments in infrastructure that support resource recycling and waste reduction.



Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik

Conversations from the roundtable

‘When it comes to climate change, the challenge is integrating traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge without compromising the principles of sustainability. We strive to instil these practices within the communities we work with, whether it’s water usage, preserving forests, avoiding harmful chemicals, or implementing clean energy programmes.’

Saumar Sharma, founder, Indian Weavers Alliance Inc

‘When it comes to climate change and fashion, we’ve become too focused on producing and consuming a lot. But here (craft), we believe small but beautiful, less but good quality - and that is what we need to promote’

Dr. Toolika Gupta, Director, IICD

‘Today, your biggest consumers and customers of any fashion for that matter is your Gen Z generation that’s fast consuming. Now, how do we make sure that we can replace that?. The only way we can make sure we are able to replace that is to speak in their language, to design in their language, and to be able to bring information to them that’s in their language.’

Nimisha Sara Philip, Impact Investment Lawyer

‘You have to make it aspirational for youngsters. The way Zara is aspirational. You go to the villages, you talk about everything good. And then you realise that that kid who has 20 rupees, wants to run and buy a packet of chips because somebody advertises it well. They do not buy bananas, which may be more healthy. So, you have to make the banana aspirational for them. So that’s how it is.’

Dr. Toolika Gupta, Director, IICD

‘Gen Z cares deeply about the climate, yet we witness the rise of ultra-fast fashion driven by social media trends like OOTD. They seek fashion that reflects their uniqueness and creativity, which explains the rise in thrifting culture. Craft can play a crucial role here. It’s a story of two worlds—environmental consciousness and the longing for individuality—and craft holds the key to fulfilling those aspirations.’

Shruti Singh, Country Head, Fashion Revolution India



05. The roots of craft: indigenous wisdom and inherent sustainability

Indigenous communities worldwide have long demonstrated a deep understanding of their local ecosystems, using available resources judiciously. Their knowledge extends beyond simple utility or aesthetics to the intricate relationships between humans, their craft, and the environment.

Craft practises, born out of a need for survival amongst many indigenous communities, have over time become symbols of beauty, craftsmanship, and traditional wisdom. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines craft as an intangible cultural heritage.²⁰ The term 'craft' needs to be understood beyond simply a production system. Understanding sustainability in the context of craft necessitates delving into its ethos and evolution.



'I recall reading that most indigenous languages do not have a direct translation for the term "sustainability".²¹ Sustainability is an inherent part of their existence, so intrinsically woven into their daily life that it didn't require a separate term. It's a way of living in unity and coexistence.'

- Shruti Singh, Country Head, Fashion Revolution India

Symbiotic relationship with the Earth

Indigenous societies have a symbiotic relationship with nature, a deep understanding of natural resource systems, and respect for the environment. These belief systems promote sustainability, environmental stewardship, and an understanding of humans as part of nature, rather than as separate entities. The concept of oneness, community, and shared responsibility is also reflected in the belief system of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' or 'the world is one family', which is also the theme of India's G20 presidency – 'One Earth, one family, one future.' This co-dependency on nature leads to the practice of inherent circularity, where resources are used, reused, and returned to Earth.

During the roundtable in Mumbai, a participant alluded to the concept of Ayni as understood by the indigenous communities of Andes in South America,²² and shared that the 'Cloud ecosystems replenish water. We should follow the same with Earth - anything that you're taking from the Earth can go back into the Earth in the most beautiful and most natural form possible.'

Most crafts are perceptive, ingenious responses to the current needs of the surroundings. Bungas, or mud homes of Kutch, are commonly embellished with mirrors for illumination in remote communities with limited access to electricity. The craft of Kantha began in villages of Bengal with residents sewing layers of rags and waste clothes together to make quilts for families. Thus, ensuring warmth during winter, while prolonging the longevity of their clothes. Over the years, while crafts might have undergone the process of evolution, one thing that remains consistent is their integration with nature.

The artisans' deep-rooted connection with nature can also be illustrated through practices like 'Eri' silk rearing, built on the concept of ahimsa or non-violence. Unlike conventional silk production, which involves boiling silkworms alive to extract the silk threads, the artisans behind Eri silk production embrace a more compassionate approach. They allow the silkworms to naturally emerge from their cocoons before harvesting the silk. This gentle and non-invasive technique preserves the well-being of the silkworms, making Eri silk an ethically sound and environmentally friendly choice.

During our research study in Assam, we had the opportunity to visit the Howly Sericulture Farm, where both Muga and Eri rearing techniques are practised. At a local farmer's home, we witnessed firsthand the cultivation of Eri silk, with the utmost respect for ahimsa. The farmers took great pride in explaining why Eri silk is often referred to as 'peace silk.'

Beyond its inherent eco-consciousness, the craft of Eri silk stands as a testament to the value of indigenous fibres and materials. Renowned for its durability and strength, Eri silk boasts unique thermoregulating properties. It keeps individuals cool during the summer and warm in the winter, making it a versatile choice throughout the year.¹³

Understanding local ecosystems and climate sense

Craftspeople often know the best times to harvest materials to ensure regrowth, how to use every part of a resource to minimise waste, and how to use natural materials in a way that conserves the environment and promotes sustainability.

Traditional crafts are intricately tied to specific seasons, enabling artisans to utilise resources when they are abundant and reduce demand during scarcity. For instance, traditional bark cloth makers in Uganda only harvest bark from Mutuba trees (*Ficus natalensis*) during the wet season when the tree can heal faster.²⁴ In regions of the Himalayas, sheep wool is sheared at specific times of the year and then processed to create various products, from clothing to rugs.²⁵ Traditional pottery makers only extract clay after heavy rains when the ground has been naturally churned and softened, reducing the need for disruptive digging.

The craft of stinging nettle weaving, as shared by Radhi Parekh, reveals the sustainable wisdom of a community that works with 'stinging nettles'. They harvest the nettle only once a year, avoiding over-extraction and transforming it into soft cloth without using any artificial fertilisers or chemicals. This deep, generational understanding of local ecosystems allows for a sustainable relationship with nature.

The story of stinging nettles and indigenous sustainability

as narrated by Radhi Parek

'A few years ago, I had an interaction with a community that is immersed in craft and climate change. I'm talking about stinging nettles. Stinging nettle is rainfed and uses no fertiliser, nothing at all that's cultivated. It yields the softest of crops.

What do indigenous communities and their knowledge have to teach us? I think that's something that we can really look at, as their way of life is such that their craft and agriculture are directly related to years of respecting the climate and working with the climate.

One litmus test was during the Covid-19 lockdown. In order to protect their little village in Nagaland, they had locked it down for three months. I was in touch with them to ask if they were okay or if they needed anything. Yet, their way of life is so self-sufficient, they felt no need to go to the nearest markets. They had everything they needed. What can we learn from these communities? Can we extend these learnings to other things?

How can we reinforce identity? How can we protect those with this kind of knowledge? How can we co-create in a way that brings about innovation without taking something away from them, and helps them take a step forward from where they are?'

As climate change alters local ecosystems, traditional artisans are adapting and navigating these evolving circumstances. When invasive species like water hyacinth—an aggressive plant notorious for being an oxygen destroyer—threatens the local ecosystems in northeast India, craft communities successfully transformed this invasive plant into a versatile range of products, including bags, baskets, and yoga mats.²⁶ This sustainable approach has not only aided in controlling the invasive species but has also provided a much-needed source of revenue to over 3,500 artisans in the North-East region.²⁷

Spiritual connection to craft

Many indigenous cultures view craftwork not just as a practical or aesthetic endeavour, but as a deeply spiritual practice. The act of creating can be seen as meditation, prayer, or act of devotion.

Kamla Devi Chattopadhyay is an instrumental figure in revolutionising crafts in India. In her book 'India Craft Traditions' she explains in great detail, about the many roles crafts play in our society. She says, 'Traditional craftsmanship in our country has meant far more than skill with materials, more than manual dexterity in manipulating tools. It has meant a total operation involving the emotions, mind, body and the vibrancy that such coordination generates.'²⁸

In his keynote speech at the Kula Conclave 2023, Ashoke Chatterjee narrated a story of an artisan, Omkarnath ji, which was a deeply moving example of what craft means to those who practise it. It highlighted the sacred relationship between an artisan and their craft. He spoke of Omkarnath ji, an artisan he had worked with for decades. Tragically, at the time, Omkarnath Ji had just lost his son in a railway station accident. When Chatterjee eventually managed to reach out to him and inquire about his well-being, Omkarnath Ji had expressed his deep grief. He had shared that now he had the additional responsibility of raising his grandchildren and supporting his daughter-in-law. When asked about what he plans to do next, Omkarnath Ji had replied that he would ask his loom, for there he would find the answers.

This belief reinforces the fact that for many, craft is more than just a means of livelihood. Craft is a vessel carrying cultural heritage and identity, a tool for socio-economic empowerment, and a beacon of resilience and hope in the face of adversity.



'The women's inherent understanding of nature's cadence holds immense potential for reshaping procurement cycles and policies in ways that resonate with the natural cadence of life and it's tied up with women leadership.'

- Stephanie Owens, Dean of Arts, Design and Media, Arts University Plymouth

06. Impact of climate change on craft ecosystems and indigenous communities

In 2018, the devastating Kerala floods severely impacted Chendamangalam weavers, causing losses estimated at Rs. 15 crores or 1.4 million GBP. This includes damage to 273 looms and significant losses to yarn banks. In Channapatna, Karnataka, known for its 200 year old history of lacquering the wood, artisans are grappling with the dwindling availability of the local aale mara (*Wrightia tinctoria*) trees, used for the wood base of toys. This decrease in local flora is linked to increased temperatures and changing rainfall patterns. The handloom weavers of Varanasi and Madhya Pradesh, are also impacted by the erratic rainfall patterns on cotton crops, leading to a scarcity of raw materials and spiralling costs.²⁹ The potters of Rajasthan face similar adversity, as the clay sourced from local riverbeds - an essential component of their craft - has become less accessible due to irregular monsoon patterns and extended droughts.

Rising temperatures adversely affect the fate of the 'Muga' silk produced in Assam, which depends on the muga silkworm (*Antheraea assamensis*), a species highly sensitive to temperature and humidity changes.³⁰ With the alteration of weather patterns, silk production has become increasingly unpredictable, directly impacting artisan livelihoods.

Unpredictable floods are eroding the textile production cycles, disrupting lives, and causing health and water crises. The altered climate is delaying traditional production cycles. Escalating temperatures are forcing artisans to migrate, and landslides along with riverbank erosion are imperilling craft communities. Waterlogged landscapes and polluted water bodies present a dismal picture, affecting not just the commute to work and the very homes of the artisans, but also the vital availability of raw materials.

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‘What we have understood from our work in the last few years is that we have climate-resilient ideas. We have traditional practices, which we just need to brand. This is the thing, the solution we have. We have 1000 years of circular economy running in our villages. That’s what we need to do. The women are so connected to nature that they have full access to natural resources as well as the solutions. This is what... we’ve been doing for years. And you know, it’s important to look back at traditional knowledge and community.’

- Rituraj, Founder 7Weaves

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‘Muga silk production is currently facing numerous challenges, starting from seed quality to the rearing process. The lack of proper quality seeds is a major concern, as it plays a crucial role in the success of the crop. Additionally, the fluctuating temperatures are causing difficulties, as Muga requires a specific temperature range of 27 to 29 degrees centigrade. The outside temperature is reaching as high as 40 degrees, making it challenging for Muga to survive under such extreme conditions. To ensure the survival and thriving of Muga, there is a need to develop solutions to adapt to the changing climate.’

- Ajit Pathak, Directorate of Sericulture, Government of Assam

Impact of climate change on craft ecosystem

Production disruptions:

1. **Disruption of production cycles:** Certain crafts are dependent on specific seasonal cycles. For instance, the cultivation of raw materials like cotton or silk is closely tied to specific weather patterns. Unpredictable weather due to climate change can disrupt these cycles, causing delays or losses in production.
2. **Impact on health:** Due to the rise in temperatures, physically laborious work done by hand, or on looms becomes more challenging, impacting the health of the artisans. According to the McGovern Foundation report³¹, droughts in urban areas can exacerbate water scarcity issues. The absence of access to safe drinking water can significantly hinder the productivity of artisans, as it increases the risks of heat exhaustion and dehydration. Over time, drought and extreme heat can lead to chronic health problems, including kidney disease from repeated exposure.
3. **Shift to synthetic materials:** Natural resources have become more scarce or unpredictable and the pressure to produce products at reduced costs has increased. This has forced artisans to seek alternatives like synthetic or polymer-based materials that are less dependent on weather and climate conditions. However, this can negatively impact the uniqueness and quality of their products. Moreover, these materials are often non-biodegradable and contribute to environmental pollution. The materials, if not local, also have a carbon footprint and makes the production more susceptible to global forces and pricing.

Availability of raw materials:

1. **Reduced access to raw materials:** Climate change has made it more challenging for artisans to procure raw materials. This could be due to decreased biodiversity, altered growth cycles of plants, or increased scarcity of water. Many artisans rely on biodiversity for their materials—different types of wood, plant-based dyes, animal-derived materials, etc. Reduction in biodiversity can limit the availability of these resources.
2. **Inconsistent quality of raw materials:** Climate variations can affect the quality of raw materials. For instance, wool from sheep that have experienced a drought may be of lower quality, affecting the end product's standard expected outcome.
3. **Increased cost of materials:** Reduced availability of raw materials due to climate change can lead to increased costs. Artisans often operate on thin profit margins, and the increases in the cost of materials can make their businesses less viable forcing them to shut it down.

Livelihood threat to artisans:

4. **Disruption of agricultural income:** Climate change has a direct impact on agriculture, especially in regions relying on rain-fed farming. Many artisans rely on agriculture as their primary source of income, supplementary income, or even as a direct food source for their families. Livestock can also suffer from decreased water and grazing land, reducing herd numbers and productivity.³²
5. **Climate-driven displacement:** As the repercussions of climate change intensify through extreme weather patterns and rising sea levels, communities face involuntary relocations. These shifts jeopardise artisans by distancing them from their customary materials, native communities, and traditional marketplaces, posing a threat to the continuity of their age-old crafts.

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‘In production, people prefer machine-made yarn and poly-based yarn because they desire perfection and evenness in weaves. Indigenous, handmade yarns often break on looms, leading craftspeople to use imported yarns to meet with market demand.’

- Sanjay Garg, Founder and Designer, Raw Mango

07. Craft as a catalyst for sustainable fashion

Craft serves as a powerful catalyst for sustainable fashion, redefining industry values with its emphasis on quality, durability, and ethical production methods. Craft aligns with circular economy principles, as handcrafted items are designed to endure and be cherished for generations.

Craft's environmental advantage

The circular economy model by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation³³ provides a lens through which the green potential of traditional crafts can be understood. The circular economy is essentially a design-focused strategy, rooted in three core principles: eliminating waste and pollution, circulating products and materials and regenerating nature. Here is how the world of crafts aligns with sustainable production and consumption and the principles of circular economy.

1. **Eliminate waste and pollution:** This cycle is not sustainable because our Earth's resources are limited. In our prevailing economic model, we extract resources from the Earth to produce goods, which, after their use, end up as waste – a straightforward linear progression. However, in a circular economy, the approach shifts to prevent the creation of waste from the outset.
 - A. **Design-led sustainability:** Crafted items are often designed for longevity, which encourages consumers to use them over extended periods. This contrasts with fast fashion, where low-quality, short-lived trendy items result in frequent replacements and increased carbon emissions from the production of new garments.
 - B. **Crafts over fast production:** While fast production frequently relies on synthetic materials, crafts predominantly utilise renewable sources. Crafts not only resist the throwaway culture but also predominantly use organic and biodegradable materials, reducing environmental harm and minimising carbon footprints.
2. **Circulate products and materials:** The circular economy's second tenet emphasises the continuous circulation of products and materials, maximising their value. It entails extending the life of materials, either by repurposing them as products or utilising them as components or basic resources. By doing so, waste is minimised, and the inherent worth of these products and materials is preserved.
 - A. **Localised production:** Traditional craft practices often occur on a local scale, which cuts down the carbon emissions tied to long-distance transportation and supports resilient, sustainable communities. This contrasts with fast fashion, which depends on global supply chains and contributes significantly to carbon emissions.

B. Waste reduction and upcycling: Crafts often focus on reusing and upcycling materials, converting what would be waste into new, beautiful products. This not only lowers the amount of waste destined for landfills but reduces the need for new raw materials and their associated environmental impacts. The techniques of *leheriya* and tie and dye from Rajasthan are deeply rooted in seasonal traditions, intricately linked to various festivals. In this traditional craft, women would frequently repurpose their fabrics by having them re-dyed. The choice of natural dyes, known for their gradual fading over time, made this practice not only a necessity but also an authentic reflection of the culture and sustainability inherent in these crafts.

1. **Regenerate nature:** Moving from a linear to a circular economy shifts our approach from depleting resources to regeneration. Transitioning to a regenerative approach allows us to mimic the efficiency of natural systems, where nothing goes to waste.
 - A. **Water conservation:** Many craft practices emphasise water-efficient production methods, avoiding water-intensive processes like fabric dyeing commonly found in fast fashion, which can lead to significant water consumption and pollution. Plant-based dyes, derived from leaves, roots, and flowers, can replace chemical dyes, minimising water pollution and conserving resources.
 - B. **Sustainable materials:** Traditional crafts frequently prioritise the use of sustainable, eco-friendly materials, such as organic fibres, natural dyes, and recycled materials. This focus on sustainable materials greatly reduces the environmental impacts tied to resource extraction and production. Plant-based materials and natural fibres, such as hemp, bamboo, organic cotton, and jute, can replace synthetic and resource-intensive materials, like polyester or acrylic.
 - C. **Low Energy Consumption and Carbon Sequestration:** Handmade crafts, being less energy-intensive than mechanised mass production, act as carbon mitigators. Moreover, certain crafts, especially those engaging with natural materials like wood, facilitate carbon sequestration, turning products into carbon reservoirs.

SUSTAINABILITY ADVANTAGE

Use of
Renewable
Material

Locally Sourced Natural Materials



Waste
Production

*Efficient Use of Resources,
Less Discard*



Overproduction, Short Product Lifespan



Pollution

Less Chemical Intensive Processes



Chemical Dyes, Microplastic Pollution



LOW CARBON

Energy
Consumption

Handmade Processes



Industrial Manufacturing Processes



Carbon
Footprint

Local Sourcing, Less Transportation



Global Supply Chains, High Transportation Emissions



LOW ENERGY

Energy
Efficiency

Less Reliant on Powered Machinery



*Mass Production Reliant on Energy
Intensive Machinery*



Renewable
Energy
Utilisation

Often Utilises Natural Energy Sources



*Dependent on Non-Renewable
Energy Sources*



Craft Production



Fast Production

Craft's sustainable fashion dilemmas

In a world dominated by the ethos of fast fashion, where speed and scale are prioritised, the craft industry confronts a series of dilemmas. The traditional craft production-to-consumption systems, celebrated for their deep ecological awareness, grapple with the challenge of reconciling economic and ecological considerations.

'In Nagaland, a recent trend has seen weavers increasingly relying on acrylic yarn due to its widespread availability and affordability, leading to a decline in the use of natural yarn. Many weavers express concerns that the time-consuming preparation required for natural yarn and their physically strenuous activity of backstrapping the loin loom is neither adequately reflected in their compensation nor acknowledged for its cultural significance.'

'I would like to emphasise that not all handlooms are eco-friendly. While we should certainly compete with power looms, we must also ensure that our handloom practices are environmentally responsible. Just because it is handloom, it does not automatically mean it is eco-friendly. We need to consider the impact on future generations and the environment. Are we using acrylic and chemical dyes that contribute to waste and soil degradation? These are the challenges we need to address rather than simply choosing between power looms and handlooms.'

The intrinsic sustainability of Indian crafts stems from their local-centric approach. Artisans harness local materials, drawing from the immediate environment. This region-centric approach ensures that the crafts are genuinely sustainable. However, not all crafts have managed to preserve their original ethos; pressures due to industrialisation, climate impact, and various economic challenges have led some crafts to adopt practices that are not entirely sustainable or circular. The relentless demand for large quantities, rapid deliveries, and uniformity at lower price points has compelled many producers and retailers to embrace a semblance of craftsmanship. Sometimes, even craftspeople themselves resort to expeditious techniques like screen printing over traditional block printing or power looms instead of handlooms, a phenomenon often referred to as 'craftwashing'.³⁴

'Many people don't seem to grasp the true value of craft. It's a slow, deliberate process, and you can't just scale up the demand for it like you do with mass-produced goods. But within that slow process lies a remarkable strength and emotional connection. Craft is something that has been handed down through generations, and that alone adds incredible value to it. Take the exquisite prints from Gujarat and Jaipur, for instance. They are meticulously crafted by hand, and when you compare them to digitally printed versions, the artisanal value is simply lost in the latter.'

To navigate these complexities, there is an urgent need for robust systems that assess the current state of craft and its alignment with sustainability principles. Such systems are essential for fostering a just transition towards a sustainable fashion industry led by India's rich tradition of craftsmanship.

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'The intrinsic character of craft doesn't lend itself to conventional business models for scaling up, so expecting it to expand using traditional commercial tactics might not provide the right solution.'

**- Devika Purandare
Head of Regional Arts Programmes,
South Asia, British Council**

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'How can we question the growth mentality and our definition of success? Defining what success means is crucial. How much do we really need? This is the source of everything.'

**- Geetanjali Kasliwal Founder and
Managing Director - AnanTaya
Retails Private Limited**

It is crucial to recalibrate how the metrics of success are defined culturally. It shapes our path, sets milestones, steers resources, and dictates goals for the ecosystem. In addition to these challenges, the craft sector confronts a myriad of other dilemmas, such as issues related to fair wages and working conditions, cultural appropriation, and the erosion of traditional skills.

Despite these dilemmas, during the research, we identified individuals and organisations navigating these challenges and identified a few best practices. These sustainable fashion enterprises, entrepreneurs, MSMEs, and well-established companies, are addressing this growing need for slow fashion through the ethos of craftsmanship and indigenous knowledge, revival of indigenous eco-friendly techniques and integration of circular economy principles in craft production.

Crafts' role in achieving united nations sustainable development goals

artisanal work play a significant role in the achievement of several united nations sustainable development goals (UN SDGs).

Life on land (SDG 15)

Many craft practices involve the sustainable use of natural resources. This respect for the environment and its biodiversity can support efforts to protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. Bamboo craft in the North-East region of India, especially in states like Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura, makes use of the abundant bamboo resources without hampering the bamboo forest ecosystems, thus promoting sustainable use of terrestrial resources



Responsible consumption and production (SDG 12)

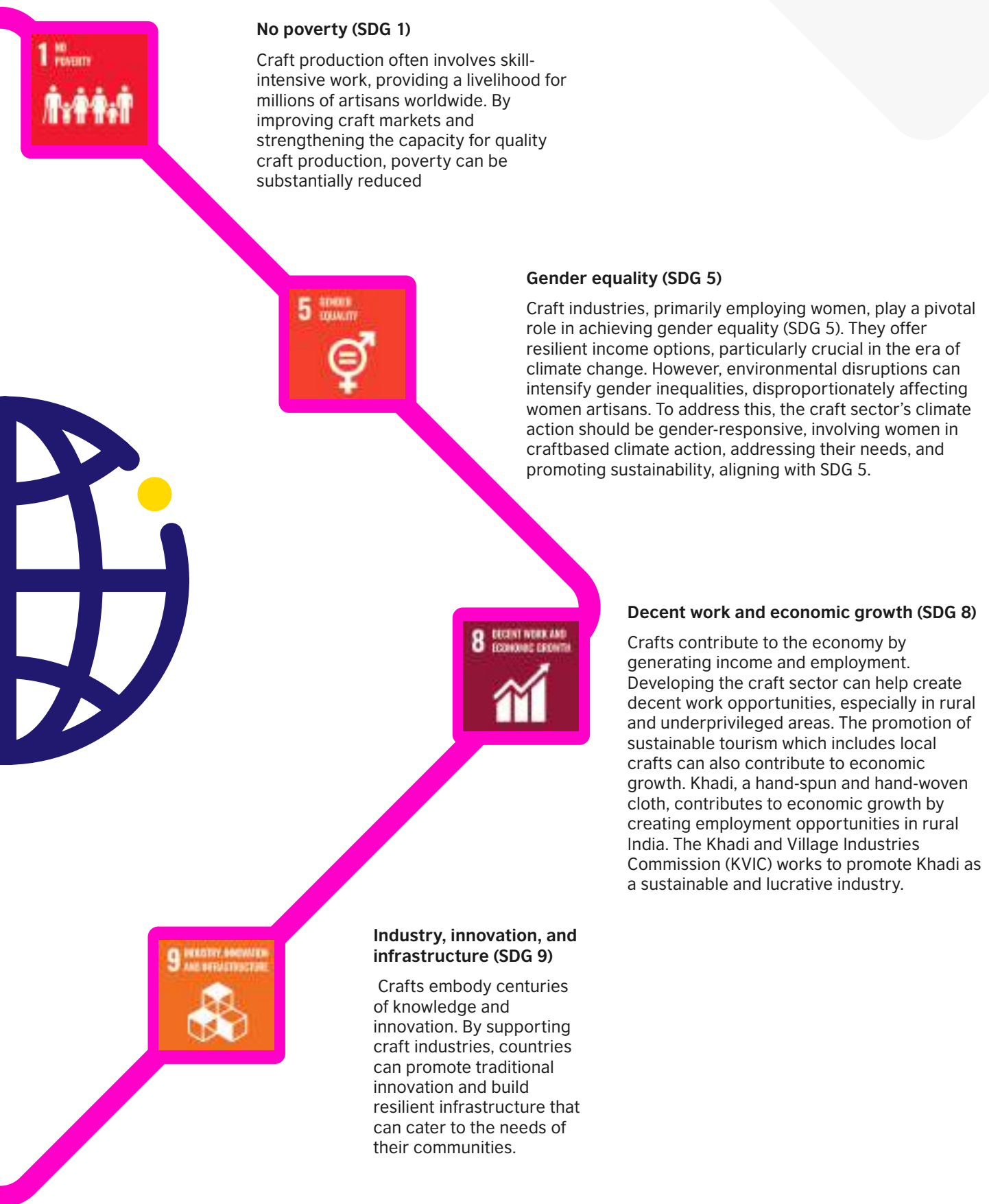
Traditional crafts often involve the use of locally sourced, sustainable materials, and environmentally-friendly methods. As such, the craft industry can play a significant role in promoting responsible consumption and production patterns.



Reduced inequalities (SDG 10)

In many societies, craft-making skills are the preserve of marginalised groups, including indigenous communities, women, and people with disabilities. By promoting inclusivity in the craft sector, it can help reduce social and economic inequalities. Craft cooperatives in India, such as SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association), enable women artisans to sell their products directly to customers, reducing gender and economic inequalities.





III. Pathways to sustainable fashion

Overcoming barriers and accelerating change

This chapter unfolds the story of resilience and adaptation in India's craft sector. It sheds light on how this sector is reinventing itself in response to pressing environmental issues and the urgent need for sustainable practices. The focus is placed on areas of critical intervention - from the revival of indigenous eco-friendly techniques to the integration of circular economy principles in craft production, from leveraging progressive technology to innovating with materials, and highlighting the significance of policy and advocacy.

Throughout this exploration we will witness firsthand, the efforts of artisans and organisations as they redefine sustainability's boundaries. Their approaches encompass the strategic use of renewable, locally-procured materials, energy-conserving production techniques, and novel designs aimed at minimising waste while enhancing product durability. The practices discussed here are not just theoretical ideas, but tangible actions that are making a difference in the real world.

Photo credit : British Council



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‘Every artisan is a climate activist. Not because of the statements they make or the marches they join but because of the way they live their lives, the manner in which they produce, and how they conduct their business.

Tacit, wordless, unspoken, inherent and deep rooted in their tenets of artisanship are the practices of circular economy, repurposing, recycling, repair, low energy use, minimum waste and producing consciously. The awareness, adaptation and concern for nature and others, are their everyday contributions to a sustainable world.

The future is truly artisanal - we need to recognise, learn and practise it.’

- Dr Ritu Sethi
Chairperson, Craft Revival Trust



Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik

The THREAD framework

The THREAD framework has been proposed to map key intervention areas and highlight existing best practices that offer pathways to sustainable fashion.

Key areas of intervention



Technology and innovation



Heritage materials and innovation



Research



Ecosystem for craftspeople and craft led-enterprises



Advocacy and policy



Development funds and investment

08. Technology and innovation

Technology and innovation are reshaping numerous industries, and the craft sector is no exception. While technology often raises concerns about its impact on traditional craftsmanship, when harnessed thoughtfully, it can serve as a powerful tool to scale best practices and facilitate new opportunities in sustainable fashion. In recent years, technology has emerged as a vital ally for Indian craftspeople and enterprises, playing a pivotal role in enhancing their craft, market access, sustainability, and transparency.

1. **Direct market access:** Technology has reimagined and broken geographical barriers, providing artisans direct access to global markets. Online platforms and e-commerce solutions act as bridges, connecting artisans directly with consumers around the world.
2. **Traceability and transparency:** The integration of blockchain and other digital tools is instrumental in incorporating traceability and transparency within the craft supply chain. This empowers consumers to make informed choices, fuelling the demand for sustainable and ethically produced crafts. Initiatives like 11.11, with Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology in garment buttons, offer complete traceability, allowing consumers to explore a product's history, its makers, and its environmental footprint.
3. **Nature-based solutions:** Technology facilitates the exploration and implementation of nature-based solutions within the craft sector. This encompasses sustainable sourcing of raw materials and eco-friendly production processes. For instance, initiatives like Brigitte Singh's 'Initiative for Water Conservation' introduce eco-friendly practices to mitigate dye pollution and efficient water management.
4. **Reducing environmental impact:** Artisans and enterprises are harnessing technology to craft creative solutions that reduce environmental impact. For instance, Doodlage and Lyfecycle's self-destructing technology for garment packaging effectively tackles the environmental consequences of single-use plastic packaging. KaSha brand leverages technological solutions to extend product usage by providing their customers resale and repair services. This approach not only promotes sustainability and durability but also significantly reduces the ecological footprint associated with fashion consumption.
5. **Process improvement:** The craft industry is evolving, not just in its products but also in its processes. For instance, the Tharangini Studio's block printing unit, through the use of natural dyes and Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS)-certified dyes in their processes and mindful production techniques, have successfully reduced their environmental footprint and achieved net-zero targets.
6. **Enhancing artisan well-being and craftsmanship:** Facilitating tools for artisans to improve the quality of output and safeguard artisan health. For example, the Tata Antaran project has equipped artisans with stable wooden looms, significantly improving the stability of the weaving process. This upgrade has led to a reduction in inconsistencies in the quality of the output weaves, enhancing the overall craftsmanship. In Nagaland, innovators have developed an ergonomic stool that facilitates the strenuous process of backstrap loom weaving, alleviating the physical strain on artisans' backs and reducing pain. These innovations not only improve artisan comfort but also contribute to better health outcomes.

Brigitte Singh

Craft and sustainable water management with nature-based solution

Brigitte Singh, a renowned block print artist in Jaipur has implemented a canna lily water filtration system to protect nearby water bodies from dye pollution and she promotes sustainable water management. The Canna lily is a natural water purifier, effectively absorbing pollutants from water bodies. Studies have shown its capability in removing carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus from wastewater under sub-tropical conditions.³⁵ Its robust roots serve as a filter and habitat for beneficial organisms. Canna lilies are resilient to toxins, making them ideal for water purification.

Collaborating with a Pune-based engineer specialising in water treatment and conservation, they designed innovative filters

made of natural sand and composite materials like cow dung. The filters foster the growth of a powerful root system that digests pollutants, resulting in water that is better than municipal filter water and almost drinkable. During our field visit to her workplace, our team saw this filtration system in action and the water was ready to be re-used.

The filters operate on a rotating basis, with one filter used for a week and then switched to the other. This method allows each filter sufficient time to digest contaminants, preventing clogging and ensuring the long-lasting efficiency of the system. These filters have been in use for 17 years without requiring replanting.



Photo credit : Shruti Singh

11.11

Harnessing RFID and Near Field Communication for transparent craft supply chain management

11:11 is a slow fashion brand known for its commitment to sustainability. They prioritise using plant-based materials for dyeing their garments to reduce environmental impact. The brand has introduced RFID and Near Field Communication (NFC) technologies into their clothing.

These technologies are cleverly embedded within the garment buttons. When consumers scan these buttons with their smartphones, they gain access to a wealth of information. They can trace the entire journey of their garment, from its creation to its arrival in their hands. This includes insights into the social and environmental aspects of production.

By implementing RFID and NFC technologies, 11:11 aims to foster transparency and responsibility in the fashion industry. They want consumers to have a deeper understanding of their clothing's origins and the impact of their choices. This innovative approach goes beyond fashion; it's about creating a connection between consumers, the artisans, and the environment.



Photo credit

‘Traditional cultural knowledge and expressions are inherently linked with nature and artisans who are practicing this for generations are in tune and linked to earth. I believe these practices are important to achieve sustainability in the future.’

- Shravani Deshmukh, Cultural Intellectual Property Rights Initiative



Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik

t : Delphine Pawlik

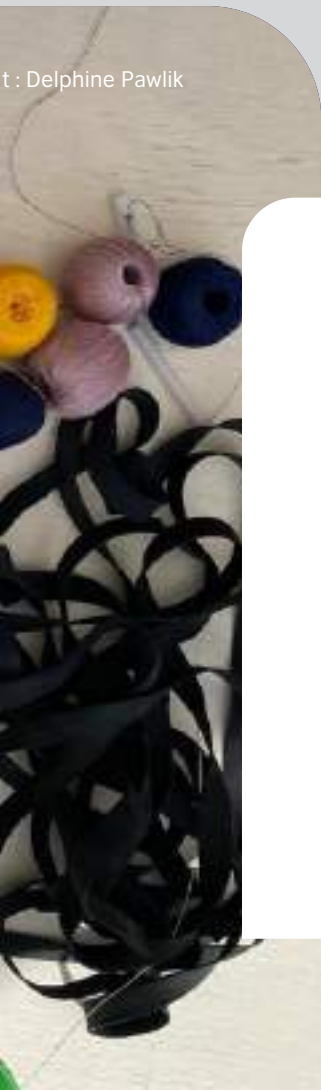
Doodlage

Combating plastic pollution through innovative packaging solutions

Doodlage, a fashion brand that upcycles deadstock fabrics into beautiful garments, recently partnered with Lyfecycle to address plastic pollution caused by single use plastic in garment packaging. Their collaboration focuses on improving Doodlage's packaging by integrating Lyfecycle's self-destructing technology into garment bags. The aim is to encourage the adoption of circular materials in the fashion industry, particularly those that combat plastic pollution and microplastics in oceans.

Lyfecycle's technology offers an alternative to conventional garment bags. It allows for recycling during the bag's usable lifespan and provides a solution for the plastic that escapes traditional recycling systems, turning it into a biodegradable wax through biotransformation. This wax attracts fungi and bacteria, which consume it as food, returning it to nature in approximately two years without leaving behind toxins or microplastics.

Doodlage's incorporation of Lyfecycle's technology into their packaging aims to support transparency and sustainability in the fashion sector. It seeks to raise awareness about environmental costs of packaging and offer an alternative that is better for the oceans.



09. Heritage materials and innovations

Heritage materials, natural fibres and plant-based processes present an authentic, eco-friendly alternative to fast fashion's environmental costs. The challenge lies in understanding their significance for climate action, protecting and reviving these techniques, improving their availability to the fashion ecosystem, and amplifying public awareness of their environmental benefits.

1. **Preservation of indigenous wisdom:** Indigenous materials often possess unique properties, some of which are just beginning to be recognised by modern science. For instance, bamboo possesses both biodegradability and impressive tensile strength. Yet, these sustainable raw materials face threats from cheaper synthetic alternatives that are readily available. This shift has led to a decline in the use of indigenous, eco-friendly materials.
2. **Natural fibres and revival efforts:** Organisations like Maati have made efforts to improve the accessibility of indigenous raw materials through initiatives like seed banks and yarn banks. Their aim is to revive eco-friendly materials and techniques that had waned with the rise of poly-based fabrics and fast fashion. The revival of Kala Cotton and Desi Wool (Desi Oon) serves as a testament to the importance of revitalising indigenous raw materials for more sustainable production processes.
3. **Innovations in sustainable materials:** Slow fashion designers are pushing the material boundaries by embracing regenerative, biodegradable materials and weaving techniques rooted in traditional knowledge. Innovative approaches such as upcycling discarded materials, creating vegan leather from floral waste, and zero-waste pattern-cutting showcase the synergy between sustainability and tradition.

Golden Feathers is an initiative where designers upcycle discarded chicken feathers, transforming them into elegant products such as scarves and stoles. Another example is Fleather - a vegan leather derived from floral waste collected from temples. This sustainable material not only offers an alternative to animal leather but also addresses the pressing issue of floral waste in the River Ganga. Iro Iro brand adopts a zero-waste approach, reminiscent of age-old Indian pattern-cutting techniques. Fabric scraps are meticulously cut into smaller pieces and then interwoven to reimagine the potential from waste.

Such innovations highlight the potential of merging sustainability with design, opening new avenues for sustainable fashion.



‘Across nations and institutions, there’s a growing recognition that materials possess a self-assembling quality, with design embedded within them. This shift in perspective places more emphasis on allowing materials to shape the form. People are becoming increasingly interested in the origins of these materials – where the clay comes from, the type of fibres used – and in allowing nature to express itself in the final design. Artisans and designers act as guides, respecting the wisdom of those who intimately understand the flows of nature.

This reunion of material knowledge and design has empowered artisans who are deeply connected to their materials. They understand when to harvest, when it will regrow, and even the right seasonal colours. It’s a reflection of design being attuned to the seasons, a wonderful synergy.

This recognition of women’s knowledge, particularly in the arts, is long overdue. What’s crucial now is that those of us engaged in these conversations, bridging connections and providing platforms, continue to amplify their voices and the value they bring.’

Stephanie Owens, Dean of Arts, Design and Media, Arts University Plymouth

Khamir

Reviving indigenous Kala Cotton and Desi Oon (indigenous wool fibre)

Khamir is a cultural institution in Bhuj which acts as a platform for the cultural ecology, heritage, and crafts and has played an integral role in reviving indigenous fibres and supporting craft communities.

Kala Cotton: In the arid and semi-arid climate of Kachchh, climate change poses significant challenges, including erratic rainfall, rising temperatures, and increased vulnerability to extreme weather events. In some regions of Kachchh, an indigenous cotton variety called Wagad cotton had long been cultivated. It was rain-fed, naturally resilient to pests and diseases, and demanded minimal care.

Wagad cotton faced a decline in popularity due to the rise of American cotton and later, *Bacillus thuringiensis* cotton (Bt-cotton).³⁶ Conventional cotton cultivation, with its heavy reliance on water and chemical inputs, exacerbates environmental degradation and contributes to climate change. The need for a climate-resilient and sustainable alternative to conventional cotton led to the revival of Kala cotton or Wagad cotton. The region witnessed a shift towards sustainable agriculture, reduced water usage, and a decrease in chemical inputs. This not only mitigated climate impact but also improved farmers' livelihoods and environmental sustainability. Khamir emerged as a key player in the revival of Kala cotton³⁷ through various interventions that include farmer training, establishing market linkages, seed preservation and policy advocacy.

Desi Oon: Khamir Crafts, India, and Fieldwork, UK, partnered under the British Council's

'Crafting Futures' programme to develop a project focused on reviving the indigenous wool fibre value chain, DESI OON, through local craft skills such as spinning, weaving, and hand felting. 'Crafting Futures'³⁸ is a global programme by the British Council with the mission to foster a sustainable future through collective creativity and collaboration.

Over 100 spinners reported an improvement in the quality of their yarn and began using more locally sourced raw materials, marking a revival in hand spinning within the community. Additionally, the design interventions implemented during the project enabled weavers to create their own designs using indigenous wool, rather than depending on third-party designers.

This empowerment led to an innovative use of Desi Oon, the wool from camels, allowing weavers to conceive new designs that acknowledged the uniqueness of local materials. The project's reach extended to 100 women weavers in Kachchh, fostering a broader sense of community and creativity.

Khamir is replicating this model in different parts of the country. This expansion aims to revive indigenous fibres, empower local communities, and foster climate-resilient practices, creating a positive impact on both craft and environmental sustainability.



Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik

Golden Feathers

Innovative fabric creation from chicken feathers - transforming lives through sustainable fashion and waste utilisation

Radhesh identified the environmental impact of non-degradable chicken feathers, which often polluted waterways, when discarded. To tackle this issue, he set out to repurpose these feathers into a valuable and eco-friendly product.

He collected discarded chicken feathers from local butchers and carefully cleaned them. Through a specialised process, he transformed these feathers into yarn. This innovation resulted in a unique fabric that is lighter than traditional woollen shawls and shares properties with natural wool varieties like Marino, New Zealand, Pashmina, and sheep and goose down.

Social impact: Initially, he faced challenges with weavers and spinners due to cultural beliefs and vegetarian practices. However, Radhesh collaborated with a specific tribal

community for the spinning process. This not only resolved production challenges but also had a positive social impact, providing gainful employment to many tribal women. Over three years, Golden Feathers recycled approximately 500 tonnes of chicken waste into handloom cloth, employed over 375 semi-skilled/unskilled workers, and empowered more than 2000 tribal women through handloom activities.

Addressing environmental challenges:

Golden Feathers addresses environmental issues like river and surface water pollution by converting waste feathers into pulp and yarn for feather wool. Additionally, their sustainable feather fabric and wool replacements for synthetic/plastic fibres, polyfills, down and feather, cotton, and sheep wool significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, benefiting both people and the planet.



‘In our practice, we have found that engaging with a community of artisans is not just an economic intervention but also social...for women, crafts is not just about earning a wage but also an accessible way to explore their identities outside of role enforced on them by patriarchy. This approach helps us record their indigenous knowledge, which has micro systems that can collectively address the climate crisis.’

- Bhaavya Goenka, Founder, Iro Iro

Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik

Iro Iro

Weaving new fabrics from upcycled waste

Iro Iro, a sustainable fashion brand, addresses environmental concerns related to the prevalent use of poly-based materials in craft practices. Their mission is to replace poly-based materials with textile waste while preserving the cultural essence of the craft.

Weaving from waste: Iro Iro's approach to weaving from waste involves sourcing textile waste from various industries and clusters. This waste is meticulously transformed into liner yarn, which serves as the foundation for handwoven fabric. This process results in environmentally friendly creations that also hold cultural significance. Iro Iro's mission is to reduce waste and replace poly-based materials with sustainable alternatives while respecting cultural heritage.

Empowering women and communities: Iro Iro's approach to empowering women and communities through craft serves as an example of their social impact. By providing opportunities for women to engage in meaningful conversations and explore their identities, Iro Iro contributes to social change.

Iro Iro's efforts in upcycling and sustainable fabric production contribute to waste reduction and environmental responsibility. Over the past five years, Iro Iro has upcycled approximately 15 tonnes of waste textile off-cuts into handcrafted fabrics. This effort has prevented the emission of 250 tonnes of CO2 into the atmosphere.

10. Research

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‘We manage what we measure. GDP, temperature, weight, Purchasing Manager’s Index (PMI) - we measure all these things, but there’s no measure for the measure itself. The future holds uncertainties beyond any measure. We can’t simply cut down all the trees in the country to boost GDP; it doesn’t reflect what lies ahead. As the largest species on the planet, we must find solutions that transcend cultures and languages, encompassing all practices. Can we measure our actions and use that knowledge to guide our path?’

- Ayush Kasliwal, Founder and Director, Ayush Kasliwal Design Private Limited

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‘Those who aren’t counted, don’t count.’

- Dr Ritu Sethi, Chairperson, Craft Revival Trust

The craft sector in India, despite its significant socio-economic and cultural importance, remains largely under-documented and lacks comprehensive data. Bridging this data gap is critical for the sustainable growth and development of the industry.

At present, there is a scarcity of data outlining the impact of craft supply chains on the environment. The need of the hour is to undertake comprehensive studies that can fill this data void. This research would serve as the base for developing craft-centric sustainability assessment systems that are craftspeople friendly. With a data-driven understanding of crafts’ environmental impacts, we can create better, more effective strategies to bolster sustainability within this sector.

The absence of reliable data also hampers efforts to understand the true scale, diversity, and economic impact of crafts in India, making it difficult to devise effective policies or strategies for their preservation, promotion, and modernisation. It also creates a challenge for craftspeople and businesses, who lack the information needed to access new markets, make informed decisions, or secure financial and institutional support. Interdisciplinary research is crucial in advancing the craft and sustainable fashion sector in India.

Craft-centric impact measurement

Craft-centric measurement systems are vital to establish a clear understanding of sustainability within the sector and to solidify that understanding through rigorous research. For the craft sector to be recognised and incorporated into global value chains, it’s essential to have systems in place that track, measure, and report on its sustainability indicators. Additionally, any global impact assessment must consider the craft sector’s unique cultural and structural nuances. Overlooking these aspects could hinder the sector’s integration into global frameworks for three primary reasons.

1. Beyond its environmental contribution, the craft sector represents an invaluable tapestry of cultural heritage, economic empowerment, skill preservation, and community cohesion: Metrics that are singularly fixated on environmental parameters risk sidelining these multifaceted socio-cultural contributions. Such narrow assessments could dissuade potential investment and limit the sector’s reach in global markets.
2. The craft sector grapples with distinct challenges that must be considered in any sustainability evaluation: Many craft activities operate within informal economic structures and are geographically dispersed, making data gathering a complex endeavour.
3. Additionally, achieving clarity on what constitutes craft, who measures sustainability, and ensuring accessibility for craftspeople in diverse geographical locations is of paramount importance.

To truly capture the depth and significance of the craft sector’s contribution to sustainable development, a holistic, tailored, and inclusive approach to measurement is not just recommended, it is imperative.

200 Million Artisans

Bridging data gaps in India's craft sector

200 Million Artisans operate within India's artisan economy, focusing on leveraging the handmade sector's inherent potential. The institute aims to enhance self-reliance and drive innovation by facilitating access to essential knowledge, resources, and networks.

Approach and implementation:

- 1. Ecosystem enabler:** 200 Million Artisans acts as a conduit, linking craft-led enterprises to the requisite tools, insights, and innovative financing mechanisms. Their strategy prioritises collaborative ventures to ensure these enterprises are equipped with solutions that address both environmental and human considerations.
- 2. Research-driven insights:** Emphasising data-driven research, the institute produces insights aimed at redressing information discrepancies, guiding investment decisions, and informing policy frameworks.
 - A. In 2023, their research 'How catalytic capital can jumpstart India's cultural economy' explored the nuances of investments in India's creative manufacturing and handmade sectors, and the implications of catalytic capital in this context.
 - B. 2021 initiative, 'Role of craft-based enterprises in "Formalising" India's informal artisan economy', presented a detailed study on the dynamics between creativity, culture, and informality in the artisan sector.
- 3. Knowledge integration through collaborative projects:** Recognising the value of interdisciplinary work, 200 Million Artisans promotes projects that intersect knowledge, resources, and partnerships, thus advancing a more holistic understanding of India's artisan sector.

200 Million Artisans' approach, rooted in targeted research and collaborative methodologies, is instrumental in addressing the challenges faced by India's artisan economy. By strategically filling knowledge gaps, the institute contributes to the sector's resilience and adaptability in a rapidly evolving global context.



Photo credit : British Council

11. Ecosystem for craftspeople and craft led-enterprises

The world of MSMEs in the craft sector is at the forefront of promoting a circular economy and driving innovative solutions within the craft ecosystem. These enterprises, often led by women and artisan entrepreneurs, play a pivotal role in transforming traditional practices into sustainable and innovative businesses. However, despite their potential, they face several challenges that hinder their growth and impact.

Gender inclusivity and sustainable practices:

Recent research from the 'Business of handmade - financing a handmade revolution' highlights the unique contributions of the Craft, Micro, and Handmade (CMH) sector. Unlike many other industries, the CMH sector is actively promoting gender inclusion, with women leading the way in various roles. Furthermore, these enterprises are making significant strides in contributing to the green economy. Among the surveyed brands, 49 per cent are involved in slow fashion, 35 per cent are upcycling waste materials, and 34 per cent are using natural dyes in their production processes.

Despite their commendable efforts, craft-led MSMEs face financial challenges. A staggering 88 per cent of handmade creative manufacturers are currently self-financing their operations. This reliance on self-funding poses limitations on their ability to scale, innovate, and create a more significant impact.

sourcing, providing capacity-building and educational resources, and raising awareness about the importance of green and circular enterprises.

Craft-led enterprises come in various forms, each with its unique focus. Some are led by artisans with a deep commitment to community development. Others are driven by innovative design interventions, while some leverage technology to bring new dimensions to their craft. The focus is on building solutions that solve the sector's current and evolving issues.

Preserving tradition through design education:

The potential to truly transform design education lies in integrating craftspeople directly into the design educational framework. Their treasure trove of knowledge, experience, and skills can be invaluable to students. By positioning artisans as mentors and trainers, we not only enrich the learning experience but also ensure that these age-old craft techniques find resonance with the next generation.



'Design extends beyond the visual element; it encompasses the entire lifecycle of our materials. True design exists in our ability to innovate solutions for our raw materials, particularly in the context of climate impact. Climate challenges are ever-evolving, and our design solutions must adapt to these different manifestations of climate changes in different parts of India, building equally unique responses.'

- Sanjay Garg, Founder and Designer, Raw Mango

To unlock the full potential of these enterprises and harness their positive impact on both people and the planet, a robust ecosystem of support is essential. Craft-led MSMEs require networks, access to skilled artisans, mentorship, and policies that can help them scale their operations sustainably. One notable organisation working to bolster ecosystem support for these enterprises is Creative Dignity. This social organisation is dedicated to connecting craft-led businesses with global opportunities, facilitating



'How can we reinforce identity? How can we protect those with this knowledge and yet co-create in a way that brings innovation so that you're not taking something away from them, but taking it a step further from where they are?'

-Radhi Parekh, Founder Director, ARTISANS'

Experiential learning, such as internships, field trips, and craft-centred projects, can provide students with a deep understanding of the craft sector. Learning directly from artisans can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the craft industry's nuances.

In conclusion, craft-led MSMEs are driving positive change in both the craft sector and the broader economy. With the right ecosystem support, these enterprises have the potential to further their impact, champion sustainability, and continue enriching our world with their creative expressions.

The Chizami Weaves initiative

Empowering women through ancestral weaving techniques

In the remote landscapes of Nagaland, Chizami Weaves provides employment opportunities for over 600 women in a region with limited job prospects. Established in 2008, the initiative aimed to offer Nagaland's women a sustainable source of income.

Chizami Weaves operates as an offshoot of NENterprise, a trust established by the NGO North-East Network (NEN) to promote social, gender, and environmental justice. Supported by organisations like the Global Fund for Women, Ford Foundation, and the Nagaland Government, the initiative aims to provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for women.

Chizami Weaves follows a decentralised model, allowing women to work from their homes. They bring their creations to a central location for final stitching and assembly. While this approach presents logistical challenges, it offers a flexible work environment that combines traditional practices with sustainable livelihoods.

They have included design interventions which have led to 60 per cent of women weavers now earning a monthly income ranging from Rs 5,000 to Rs 6,000. Chizami Weaves fosters a sense of community and enhances women's self-confidence through various training programmes, learning opportunities, and exhibitions.



Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik

Rangrez

Reviving Leheriya craft through design innovation

Mohammed Saqib comes from a long line of artisans, specialising in the Leheriya craft. Leheriya, a technique of tie-dye, creates wave-like patterns on fabrics and has been a cherished tradition of Saqib's family for over 150 years. His grandfather, Shri. Ikramuddin Neelgar, was a renowned practitioner, earning several awards for his skills. Despite the prestigious history of the craft, Leheriya is facing extinction. Modernisation, industrial competition, and the arduous labour-intensive processes, compounded with low wages, have deterred artisans from practising traditional methods.

Return to authenticity: embracing natural dyes Saqib observed a shift from natural to chemical dyes over time, primarily because chemical dyes were easier to work with. This shift, however, diluted the craft's authenticity. Saqib saw the need to revert to natural dyeing practices and started creating products using natural dyes, reviving Leheriya's traditional essence.

Educational enrichment and innovation:

Saqib's educational journey at the Indian Institute of Craft and Design (IICD) played a pivotal role in broadening his perspective on the importance of innovation within the craft. Leveraging his design education and understanding of his ancestral craft, Saqib embarked on a journey to breathe new life into Leheriya. His exploration included introducing up to 64 colours in a single saree and reinvigorating traditional designs, while also remaining committed to the use of natural dyes.

Craft revival and sustainable livelihoods

Saqib's work extends beyond just preserving a craft. It is about sustaining livelihoods, maintaining cultural identity, and creating a fair, equitable craft industry. The handmade nature of Leheriya supports many families, providing a source of income and continuity of cultural heritage. Saqib's brand embodies the importance of building a strong design-led enterprise rooted in tradition and innovation.



Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik

12. Advocacy and policy

Handmade narratives: the power of advocacy

In an era dominated by conversations around sustainable fashion and climate change, one narrative that often falls under the radar is the invaluable contribution of traditional craft systems. These craft systems, deeply ingrained in local cultures and economies worldwide, hold untapped potential for slow fashion systems. From locally sourced materials to low-carbon production, the principles embodied by craft practices align significantly with global sustainability goals. Yet, there exist substantial barriers to connecting craft to the universal language of sustainability and effectively communicating their intrinsic value to a broader audience.

Craft and climate conversations

During his keynote speech at the Kula Conclave 2023, Ashoke Chatterjee shared a personal anecdote that encapsulates the dichotomy of views surrounding the craft sector. He spoke of how he had once been cautioned in India against investing time in the craft industry. It had been labelled as a 'sunset sector with no future, only suitable for museums'. In stark contrast, a few months later, at the World Crafts Council meeting in China, he heard a Chinese official refer to crafts as a 'sunrise industry', deemed as crucial to China's rise as IT hub.

According to Chatterjee, during the council meeting, the Chinese perspective was rooted in the belief that, 'Creativity and innovation are the only source of survival in today's competitive market. And the seeds of creativity or innovation are in the craft sector. So if you destroy the crafts, you destroy your creative and innovative advantage.'

This dichotomy underlines a significant language, understanding, and communication gap when it comes to acknowledging the potential of craft in the context of an emerging green economy.

Regrettably, the voice of crafts and artisans often gets lost in the cacophony of the international discourse on climate change, which is disproportionately focused on technological solutions. The UN, recognising the importance of this neglected narrative, has created a forum, The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), as an advisory body to the Economic and Social Council and for indigenous communities' input on climate change.

Global language of sustainability and traditional craft

Four key areas are pivotal to accelerating efforts in harmonising the global language of sustainability with traditional craft.

1. **Connecting the global language of sustainable demand and the supply of craft:** Even though traditional crafts and global sustainability speak to the same principles, they often exist in separate conversations, much like two people sharing the same thoughts but speaking different languages. For example, the crafts person's practice of using locally sourced materials is a practical representation of the 'local sourcing' idea in sustainability. Similarly, handmade aligns perfectly with the 'less energy consumption' and 'low carbon production' ethos of sustainability. By drawing these correlations, we can translate the story of crafts into the broader language of global sustainability. Thus broadening its reach and resonance.
2. **Artisan representation in environmental dialogues:** Despite their rich understanding of sustainable practices and their direct relationship with nature, artisans often remain on the periphery of these significant discussions. This demands the cultivation of more inclusive, accessible dialogues. Coupled with partnerships with influencers and media to broadcast artisan stories, this approach can enhance their visibility and influence. By welcoming artisans into the heart of decision-making, we can embed their time-honoured, sustainability-oriented knowledge into our global climate discourse.
3. **Storytelling, advocacy, and influencer impact:** To establish a universal understanding of craft and sustainable fashion within the industry and among consumers, storytelling plays a pivotal role. The narratives of artisans, including their cultural heritage, historical context, expertise, and craft techniques, serve as a potent framework to emphasise the inherent sustainability of craft. Disseminating these stories through various mediums such as books, documentaries, social media, and exhibitions can propel the world of crafts into the sustainability spotlight, where they rightfully belong.

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‘As a sustainable fashion activist whose work has spanned grassroots organising, photojournalism, writing and more, I believe in the radical work of reimagination through storytelling. The climate crisis presents a crisis of narrative- we need to engage in the work of solutions-oriented journalism to inform our next steps as a culture and global community; and fashion, being a vehicle for storytelling, presents an amazing tool for climate action.’

- Aditi Mayer, Sustainable Fashion Content Creator and Consultant, ADIMAY

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‘There’s a trend called De-influencing, where people embrace slow living, mindfulness, and reconnecting with their roots. These are great storytelling channels to reach out to. It’s not about making sales, but being more mindful of our choices and how we consume clothes. I hope the next generation will change the way we approach clothing, embracing collaborative systems, shared wardrobes, and mindful sourcing. If they seek an ethical outfit of the day, craft holds the key with its one-of-a-kind products. Bridging this narrative is vital for a sustainable fashion future.’

- Shruti Singh, Country Head, Fashion Revolution India

- 4. Reframing value perception:** Recognising the value of craft in the context of sustainability. In mainstream markets, craft products are often undervalued, and perceived as less trendy or attractive compared to mass-manufactured goods. This perception not only jeopardises the economic stability of artisans but also limits the proliferation of sustainable craft products. Recognising the manifold value of craft in sustainability is vital to acknowledge its role in cultural preservation, local economic strengthening, biodiversity endorsement, and advocacy for fair trade and responsible production. Education will also play a key role in bridging this gap. By emphasising these values and advocating for equitable pricing of craft items, we can shift the perception of craft within the mainstream market.

Artisans as catalysts of sustainability

Craftsmanship is also a living testament to the power of storytelling, an essential tool in building empathy and promoting sustainable choices. It carries within its folds, narratives of artisans’ knowledge, culture, history, and their intricate relationships with their natural surroundings. These narratives can be leveraged to demonstrate the integral role artisans play in climate action.

The potential of artisanal crafts as catalysts for sustainability necessitates advocacy at various levels. It is vital to bridge this gap, to tap into climate financing opportunities that are increasingly focusing on ‘nature-based solutions’ as a key area of intervention. Policymakers, educational institutions, businesses, and individuals all have a role in promoting crafts as a pathway to sustainable development. By giving due recognition to artisans as change agents, we can foster dialogue that makes sustainability not just an academic or policy-oriented concept, but a lived reality.

Role of strategic policy

The craft sector is a deep-seated part of our cultural heritage and a significant contributor to the national GDP. Policy and governance can play an important role to tackle the interconnected facets of craftspeople livelihoods, gender, and climate change. The sector, unfortunately, faces numerous hurdles like lack of access to funding, challenges in raw material procurement, and the complexity of market access.

Currently, the craft sector is a part of the Ministry of Textiles, although it involves various materials like stone and several other handicrafts. With schemes spread across multiple ministries including the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Skill Development and Ministry of MSMEs, navigating the system becomes arduous for the sector. A common theme emerging from most roundtable discussions suggests the need for a single-window access, a single touchpoint, or a single ministry to manage the mandate for the vast population of 200 million artisans in the country.

India's commitment to sustainable fashion

In recent times, the government has launched several schemes for sustainable fashion with the goal of establishing India as a global epicentre for circular textiles.

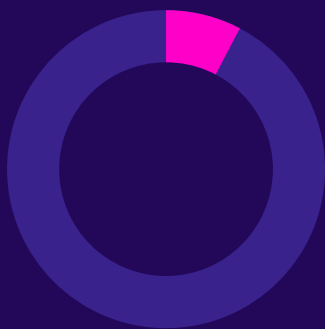
1. **Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment):** In 2021, at the global climate conference COP26, India pledged its strong commitment to significantly cut carbon emissions by the year 2030. To actuate this commitment, the government launched the Mission LiFE initiative, emphasising the integral role of circular economies and indigenous cultures in climate action. This initiative envisions a transition from a 'use-and-throw' consumption model to a sustainable circular economy. The handmade textile industry, with its substantially reduced carbon footprint in comparison to mass production methods, fits seamlessly into this initiative.
2. **Ministry of Textiles' ESG Taskforce:** Established as a multi-stakeholder platform, this initiative seeks to address the inherent challenges of the Textile and Apparel sector, particularly its fragmented nature. By integrating perspectives from key industry voices, the taskforce aims to foster cleaner and more efficient operational practices among MSMEs, setting the groundwork for a national shift towards sustainable textiles.
3. **'Circularity in textiles' initiative by the Ministry of Textiles:** Introduced to unite women-led organisations operating within the circular textile space, with the aim of enhancing visibility and fostering collaboration. This initiative underscores the vital role of the circular economy in addressing climate crisis, biodiversity loss, pollution, and supply chain challenges.
4. **Ministry of Textiles and UNEP partnership on 'Enhancing circularity and sustainability in textiles':** Aimed at promoting sustainable practices and disseminating knowledge about circularity in textiles. Marking a first, the Ministry engaged in consumer awareness campaigns on textile sustainability. The program, inaugurated on 30th January 2023, witnessed virtual engagement from 2,713 stakeholders across various social media platforms.
5. **National crafts museum #KnowYourWeave educational initiative:** To commemorate National Handloom Day on August 7, the Ministry of Textiles, in collaboration with the National Crafts Museum and Hastkala Academy, launched a two-week educational campaign. Engaging over 75 schools and nearly 10,000 students, the program introduced various handloom techniques, including Banarasi brocade and Andhra Ikat. Supported by the National Institute of Fashion Technology, master weavers held live demonstrations and interactive activities, such as block printing and dye painting, to immerse students in the world of handloom.
6. **Bhartiya Vastra evam Shilpa Kosh initiative:** A Craft Repository Portal launched to promote Textiles and Crafts, reflecting the government's commitment to indigenous production ('Swadeshi') and supporting the 'Vocal for Local' ethos. The platform seeks to ease weavers' work, enhance their productivity, and elevate design quality, aligning with the vision of providing global market exposure to artisans.
7. **Ekta Mall initiative:** A concerted effort to establish malls in every state capital, serving as centralised hubs to showcase and promote handicrafts and handloom products from across districts and states. This initiative not only aims to unify the craft display but also to provide a comprehensive market for artisans, in sync with the broader 'Make in India' campaign.

These policies highlight the government's commitment to creating supportive policies for the sustainable fashion sector. To further advance this sector and meet its evolving requirements, there is a growing need for both public and private support systems and partnerships.

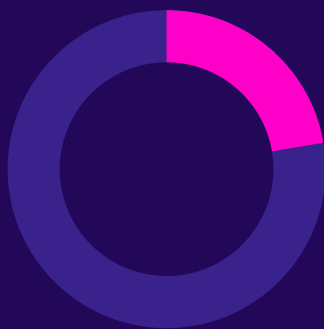
13. Development funds and investment

While world leaders and financial institutions actively scout for sustainable and innovative strategies to combat climate change, the craft sector, despite its potential for mitigating climate change impact, remains an underinvested and undervalued asset in this battle. The inherent sustainability of traditional crafts and craft innovators can position them as primary beneficiaries in climate-focused investments, but this potential is yet to be fully recognised or harnessed.

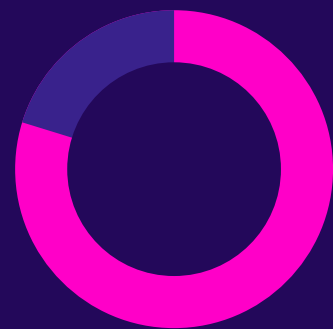
Indigenous communities and craft play a pivotal role in preserving our planet.



5%
of Indigenous
communities protect



22%
of Earth's surface and
safeguard



80%
of its biodiversity

27 times fewer emissions in Forests managed by Indigenous Communities leading to Net Zero Deforestation (Brazil)³⁹

Current funding model for craft sector



Government schemes



Private foundations



Non-profit organisations



Corporate social responsibility

Investment gaps



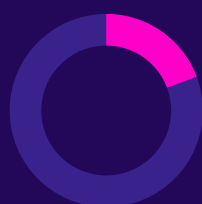
USD 384

Billion investment in Nature based Solutions (NbS) per year by 2025 to tackle global crises⁴⁰



USD 154

billion per year is the current funding in Nature based Solutions (NbS)⁴¹

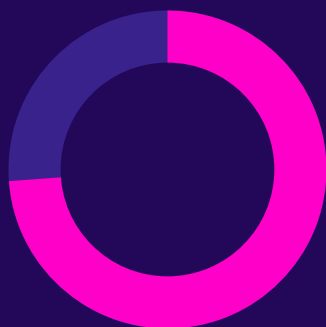


17 %

of total investments come from private capital⁴²

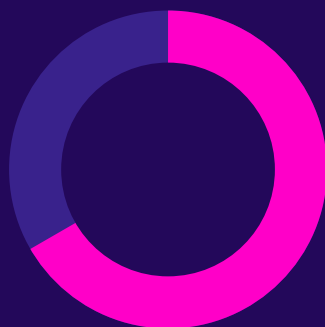


Crafts are currently not considered as a sector for NbS in most Green funds



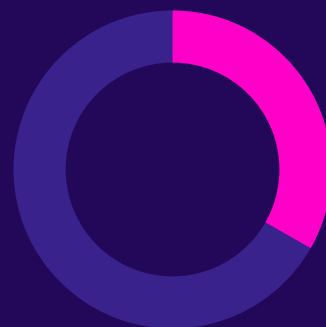
74%

of handmade and creative manufacturers identify locating the right investor as a formidable challenge



65%

face hurdles in securing access to finance



33%

of HCMs maintain a steadfast commitment to environmental sustainability⁴³

Craft's climate investment opportunity

1. Sector specific businesses that champion UN SDG 12 'Responsible consumption and production' have an untapped opportunity in India amounting to more than 1\$ trillion according to 'Financing a handmade revolution' by 200 Million Artisans.⁴⁴
2. Crafts have an inherent alignment with nature and sustainability making them an attractive sector to be considered under climate investments and Nature-based Solutions (NbS). NbS emphasises actions that involve the protection, conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of ecosystems.⁴⁵ As per a UN climate change high-level champions report from 2022, harnessing nature-positive solutions could unveil up to US\$4.5 trillion of new business opportunities annually by 2030.⁴⁶
3. In 2023, PwC's 'Accelerating Finance for Nature' report pointed out that the lack of funding for nature-focused projects is due to a gap in understanding, rather than lack of interest. Some investors are discouraged from investing due to the long timeframes required for financial returns. Short-term projects often seem more attractive.⁴⁷
4. One of the primary barriers to investment is the absence of data that validates our intrinsic belief in the craft sector's potential for climate mitigation. A further challenge is comprehending the scale of slow fashion's growth, as it diverges from fast fashion brands. The unique nature of slow fashion means it can't be evaluated with the same tools and frameworks as fast fashion, potentially diminishing its investment appeal.
5. In steering the craft sector toward the global slow fashion forefront, several areas demand investment. Craft entrepreneurship emerges as a bridge between tradition and innovation. Skill development and embracing digital technology connects artisans to global markets, while supply chain transparency builds consumer trust. Investing in material innovation, research and sustainable infrastructure, the craft sector can seamlessly align to sustainable fashion's future.
6. The crux lies in crafting a compelling narrative that binds traditional crafts with climate goals, particularly adaptation and mitigation. As global climate investment becomes more intricate, focusing on specific goals like reducing greenhouse emissions or enhancing community resilience, crafts can find their rightful place.



'It is important to advocate for a more inclusive approach, where climate investment supports the essential work of these environmental stewards, who hold the key to a resilient and balanced future.'

Who's stewarding the land? It could be a craftsperson, weaving fibres with skill; it could be an agricultural person, a farmer-builder cultivating wholesome veggies and fruits. But let us not forget those who abide by agro-ecological principles, practising climate-friendly methods, and caring for our precious Earth. How do we ensure that climate finance reaches their hands? Presently, it seems that only those engaged in renewable energy or high-tech innovations are eligible for such support, leaving behind the true heroes nurturing the land and water.'

- Tamara Law Goswami, Advisory Board Member, Bharat Agroecology Fund

Hearth Ventures

Investment in India's craft and circular economy

Founded in 2021, Hearth Ventures' mission is twofold: to fuel the growth of India's handmade crafts enterprises and to robustly support the nation's vast arts and crafts heritage. The firm aims to reimagine and elevate Indian craftsmanship, amplifying the global presence of Indian artisanal products and significantly benefitting the artisans and craftspeople in India's rural regions.

Investment focus

Product-based Enterprises: Entities involved in crafting products like furniture, lighting, pottery, wall art, kitchenware, gift items, accessories, and more.

Enablers: These are the backbone companies that streamline the sale of Indian crafts. They span eCommerce wholesalers, logistics entities, tech firms, and more.

Sellers: Ranging from eCommerce platforms to retail chains, marketplaces, and international distributors.

Core Criteria: Emphasis on the potential impact on artisans, alignment with UN Sustainable Development Goals, entrepreneurial talent, scalability, and fit within Hearth's portfolio.

Value Beyond Capital Hearth Ventures' support extends beyond mere financial backing. The firm offers invaluable business mentorship and seeks to foster synergies among its portfolio companies.

Portfolio: Their investment portfolio includes Kadam Haat, Shobhitam, Relove



Photo credit : British Council

IV. Recommendations

During the stakeholder dialogues, we invited participants to share their concrete ideas and visions for an improved future of the craft industry in the face of the climate crisis. These conversations generated a wealth of innovative concepts and aspirations.

These suggestions present diverse opportunities for every stakeholder - from artisans, designers, and educators, to policymakers, and community leaders - to adopt, evolve, and collaboratively build a better future for craft in a sustainable world.

Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik



14. Stakeholder aspirations



15. Crafting the future together: a roadmap for change

Here are strategic recommendations for ecosystem actors to unlock the craft sector's potential for responding to the climate crisis.

1. National strategic framework for evolution of craft sector to global demands

A. National craft sustainability strategy:

Constitute a working group to formulate a strategic, long-term plan for transforming the craft sector into a global hub for responsible manufacturing. This blueprint should be developed with the collaboration of a broad spectrum of stakeholders including government agencies, NGOs, academia, and businesses. It should include a roadmap for building craft sector resilience to climate change.

B. Metrics for sustainability evaluation:

Conduct a systematic mapping and analysis of data specific to the craft ecosystem to assess its contribution to GDP, livelihood generation, and sustainability impact. Create well-defined metrics and evaluation criteria to measure the environmental impact of craft projects. Data-driven insights would be instrumental in the planning and implementation of sustainable strategies for the craft sector.

C. Integrated craft industry support portal:

Create a centralised platform consolidating offerings from various government entities to establish a single access point for the craft industry. This portal would ease the process of accessing schemes, benefits, and information, thereby improving the efficiency of craft businesses.

2. Craft sector ecosystem, enterprises and entrepreneurship

A. Recognition and visibility of sustainable practices in craft:

Develop initiatives such as craft awards, green craft tourism, and craft ambassador programmes to highlight and amplify best practices like innovative material usage, waste reduction, and energy-efficient production. Launch public campaigns to highlight the significance of sustainable crafts in mitigating climate change. Improve the visibility of craft as a priority.

B. Craft based slow fashion entrepreneurship:

Develop comprehensive capacity-building programmes, such as workshops, training, and technical assistance, to equip craft communities with skills and knowledge to adopt and maintain sustainable practices. Given that many crafters are already practising tenets of slow fashion, it is crucial to provide them with the resources, training, and market access they need to champion artisans as leaders in the sustainable fashion sphere.

C. Craft business incubators, accelerators and research grants:

Establish robust support systems to provide essential resources, expert guidance, and financial backing for up-and-coming craft enterprises. Facilitate grants and funding for research and innovation in sustainable craft practices. Encourage institutions to conduct research studies to bridge the existing knowledge gaps in the sector.

D. Common facility centers (CFCs):

Invest in the development of CFCs, to incorporate sustainable skills training, promote the use of recycled materials, and establish a supportive system to connect artisans with markets and financial aid for sustainable practices.

3. Innovation and technology advancements

A. Access to indigenous materials:

Facilitate the availability and affordability of traditional and locally sourced materials like bamboo, jute, coir, and khadi. The government can support this by reducing tax implications, streamlining distribution systems, and encouraging state-level artisan communities to collaborate. Facilitate the creation of seed banks for the conservation and propagation of indigenous plant species integral to craft production, thereby ensuring a reliable supply of natural fibres and dyes.

B. Material innovation:

Allocate resources towards research into innovative and eco-friendly materials that could be utilised in craft production, sparking both material sustainability and innovative growth within the craft sector. Incentivise businesses, and innovators creating new materials.

C. Technology integration:

Advocate for the integration of eco-friendly technologies, such as energy-efficient equipment and renewable energy sources, within the craft sector. Support advancement of new technology solutions to enhance artisans' work, facilitate seamless access to global markets, streamline business operations, and provide transparency and traceability throughout the craft value chain. This integrated technological approach will not only drive sustainability but also foster growth and trust in the industry.

4. Education and research

- A. **Interdisciplinary collaboration, research and innovation platforms:** Foster collaborative projects and initiatives between various academic departments, such as environmental science, business, engineering, and arts, to combine diverse skill sets and insights. Undertake research that intersects crafts, climate change, and sustainable development. Establish knowledge sharing platform where researchers, academics, and craft practitioners can exchange knowledge and best practices related to sustainable crafts.
- B. **Academia-artisan alliances:** Facilitate partnerships between academia and craft communities. Such collaborations enable context-specific research that addresses the unique challenges, needs, and opportunities for sustainable growth in the craft sector.
- C. **Sustainability-focused education in schools and universities:** Integrate sustainability modules into a broad range of curricula, including design, arts, and anthropology. Introduce field trips to craft clusters to provide them with a unique opportunity to connect with our rich cultural heritage and gain awareness about the skilled artisans who bring life to their clothes and products.

5. Impact investment and partnerships:

- A. **Green financing and investment:** Develop craft-specific financing and investment options that prioritise projects integrating sustainable materials and practices. Align these financing strategies with 'Responsible consumption and production' (SDG 12).
- B. **Impact investment funds and platforms:** Establish dedicated funds and platforms for impact investments that support sustainable craft enterprises. These initiatives will attract investors seeking both financial returns and positive environmental impact.
- C. **Investor-artisan-entrepreneur networks:** Facilitate the establishment of robust networks between investors, craft enterprises, and artisans to support eco-friendly initiatives. Develop networks that support sustainable craft entrepreneurship, facilitating knowledge-sharing, collaboration, and market access for artisans. This would also involve expanding artisans' market reach by connecting them with potential buyers, retailers, and distributors.



'At its core climate doomism exists because we have a crisis of imagination. If you can engage in the radical work of reimagination - I think that is the future'

- Aditi Mayer, Sustainable Fashion Content Creator and Consultant, ADIMAY

Conclusion

For India, the UK, and globally - craft and indigenous knowledge will play a crucial role in responding to the climate crisis. These are time-honoured practices passed down through generations, prioritising sustainability and resourcefulness. Handmade products with locally-sourced materials reduce carbon footprints and promote eco-friendly alternatives, fostering responsible production. The roundtable discussions revealed stories of resilience, nature-based solutions, and models integrating gender, livelihoods, climate, and slow fashion. It also confirmed that artisan communities, owing to their close ties with the environment and reliance on natural resources, are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change and we need a roadmap to build resilient communities.

The craft sector can positively contribute to climate resilience and sustainability. It should be integrated into broader climate action plans, globally. The ecosystem requires a multifaceted approach, including the promotion of nature-based solutions, support for craft entrepreneurs, scaling earth-centred solutions, and reforming education. Governments dedicated to addressing climate change must prioritise this sector and restructure climate finance to support its growth.

It is time for a craft revolution - to bring artisans of change to the forefront and shape a future that honours both indigenous communities and our planet.



Photo credit : Delphine Pawlik

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17. Glossary

Carbon credits represent a transparent, measurable, results-based way for companies to support activities that keep global climate goals within reach. They can support protecting and restoring natural carbon sinks, such as forests or marine ecosystems, or scaling emerging carbon removal technology. They also serve as measuring points of carbon emissions.

Carbon sequestration refers to the process of capturing and storing atmospheric carbon dioxide in a carbon pool through biological, chemical, or physical processes. It is a natural process that can also be technologically enhanced, aimed at reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide to mitigate global climate change.

Circular economy is an economic model of production and consumption aiming to build an autonomous, sustainable society in line with the issue of limited environmental resources. It aspires to transform into a regenerative economy by designing new processes and solutions for resource optimization, reducing waste to a minimum, and prolonging the product life cycle. This involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing, and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible.

Climate change denotes long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. These shifts can be natural or human-induced, primarily due to burning fossil fuels. The term currently describes global warming and its effects on Earth's climate system, including increased greenhouse gases that trap more heat in Earth's lower atmosphere, causing global warming.

Climate resilience refers to the ability to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to hazardous events, trends, or disturbances related to climate.

Eco credits represent a rewarding system promoting eco-friendly consumer behaviours, designed to have a positive environmental impact. It encourages end-users to reuse and recycle products.

Environmental stewardship refers to the responsible use and protection of the natural environment through conservation efforts and sustainable practices. It involves the active participation of individuals, groups, nonprofits, government bodies, and other networks acting as caretakers of the environment.

Fast fashion describes a business model that replicates recent catwalk trends and high-fashion designs, mass-producing them at low cost and bringing them to retail stores quickly to meet high demand. Fast fashion leverages trend replication and low-quality materials, often synthetic fabrics, to bring inexpensive styles to consumers.

Handicrafts refer to products, equipment, and industries created manually or with simple tools. The creation of these products, such as pottery, Pattachitra painting, Silver Filigree, and Lacquer making, involves human skill and talent, leveraging simple, non-complex tools.

Handloom is a manually operated loom, different from motorised or electrically powered ones. Handlooms enable weavers to create fabric by interlacing the warp and weft threads, facilitating quicker, more consistent, and more durable weaving. Handlooms vary in complexity, from portable backstrap looms to room-sized jacquard looms.

Invasive plant species refer to flora that, either intentionally or accidentally, have been introduced to a new environment where they spread aggressively, disrupting the local ecosystem's balance. Although they can be detrimental in some regions, these plants are not inherently "bad." The issues occur when they infiltrate non-native ecosystems.

Permaculture involves the cultivation of agricultural ecosystems in a self-sufficient and sustainable manner. It draws inspiration from nature to develop synergistic farming systems based on crop diversity, resilience, natural productivity, and sustainability.

Powerloom, a mechanised tool invented by Edmund Cartwright in Britain in 1784, uses a drive shaft for power. This invention enabled rapid textile creation compared to hand-driven looms, making it a defining machine of the industrial revolution.

Regenerative agriculture is a holistic farming system focusing on soil health, food quality, biodiversity improvement, water quality, and air quality. It emphasises increasing soil organic matter, biota, and biodiversity, improving water-holding capacity and carbon sequestration.

Slow fashion is an awareness and approach to sustainable fashion that carefully considers the processes and resources required to make clothing. It prioritises timeless, high-quality designs over trend-driven pieces destined for landfill after a few wears. It advocates for clothing and apparel manufacturing with respect for people, the environment, and animals.

UN SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure peace and prosperity for all by 2030. The 17 interlinked SDGs recognize that actions in one area will affect outcomes in others and that development must balance social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

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19. Dialogues from roundtables

These are a few additional excerpts from the conversations that took place in the five roundtables in Bangalore, Delhi, Guwahati, Jaipur, and Mumbai.

Craft, sustainability and scale

‘Many people don’t seem to grasp the true value of craft. It’s a slow, deliberate process, and you can’t just scale up the demand for it like you do with mass-produced goods. But within that slow process lies a remarkable strength and emotional connection. Craft is something that has been handed down through generations, and that alone adds incredible value to it. Take the exquisite prints from Gujarat and Jaipur, for instance. They are meticulously crafted by hand, and when you compare them to digitally printed versions, the artisanal value is simply lost in the latter.’

‘We were working with about 2,000 weavers in three different clusters, and when it comes to climate change, our belief has always been about sustaining nature. The challenge is integrating traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge without compromising the principles of sustainability and climate change. We strive to instil these practices within the communities we work with, whether it’s water usage, preserving forests, avoiding harmful chemicals, or implementing clean energy programs. Our responsible business programme also educates producer organisations on conducting business with a sense of responsibility.’

‘If you look at handicrafts, for example, when we worked in the North-East, a lot of products are made out of bamboo. And one of the common things we see is that from start to finish, all the material used is bamboo, and it’s something that grows back very fast. The process we are using has a low environmental impact, it’s biodegradable.’

‘When it comes to crafts in India, they are, in my opinion, incredibly sustainable and eco-friendly. Why? Because the artisans work with local materials, utilising resources available in their surroundings. It’s a way of life deeply connected to the region they belong to, making it a truly sustainable practice. But here’s the concern: once we start focusing solely on satisfying mass demand, we risk compromising the essence of craft. The pressure to cater to large volumes might lead to shortcuts or compromises in quality, and that’s when we lose the true spirit of craftsmanship.’

‘When we started our project five years ago, we realised that the entire North-East region is a rich biodiversity zone. However, we also noticed that conventional practices could potentially harm these biodiversity hotspots, which are crucial for the environment. This led us to establish the Research Institute with a team of ecologists and designers. Together, we aim to find sustainable solutions to conserve the rich biodiversity of this region and create a model that can be applied to other biodiversity hotspots worldwide. We are currently running two projects, one in the Reserve Forest of Meghalaya and the other in the Bill Wildlife Centre, both focusing on working with local communities and learning climate-positive approaches.’

‘Craft, in its true sense, is very tangible. But you know, I think the impact that we see from it is intangible. Nature, the core of its nature, is intangible.’

‘What we have understood from our work in the last few years is that we have climate-resilient ideas. We have traditional practices, which we just need to brand. This is the thing, the solution we have. We have 1000 years of circular economy running in our villages. That’s what we need to do. Women are so connected to nature, that access to natural resources that they have, the solutions to order, this is what, you know, what we’ve been doing for years. And, you know, it’s important to look back at traditional knowledge and community.’

‘This is a tradition, and we must respect it. It’s essential not to impose urban ideas on a rural setup.’

Impact of the climate crisis on craft ecosystem and artisans:

“Floods, silk production affected, health and water crises, delayed production cycles, rising temperatures, artisans migrating, landslides, riverbank erosion, waterlogging, and polluted water bodies. People’s houses and roads to work are flooded, and the availability of raw materials is impacted. Landfills are filling up rapidly with discarded textiles. Flora and fauna are suffering, wild silk is disappearing, and animals are affected. Weaving workforces are vulnerable to the impact of the climate crisis, facing physically laborious work due to the rising temperatures.”

There is a lot of RandD support required because of these adverse climatic conditions. As mugha is 100% outdoor rearing, it requires a temperature of 28 to 29 degrees. But right now, today, in the month of March, it is 30 degrees. So how will the silkworm survive? It’s a big question. We need RandD support for developing a variety that can survive in such adverse climatic conditions. In the months of April and May, temperatures can go up to 39-40 degrees, making it quite impossible for the silkworm to survive since it is a cold-blooded animal.

Craft and indigenous identity

“The main inspiration behind my work has always been to reclaim our indigenous identity. There was this one incident when I visited a rubber village in the same area where I work. As I shared my passion for working with textiles and creating very indigenous weaves and motifs, one woman quickly spoke up, saying, ‘We have lost our language; we can’t even speak our mother tongue.’ This made me realise the immense value of cultural memory within communities. Even if people have lost their spoken language due to various factors, we can still reclaim their textile language”.

“How can we reinforce identity? How can we protect those with this knowledge and yet co-create in a way that brings innovation so that you’re not taking something away from them, but taking it a step further from where they are?”

Sustainable fashion, craft and GenZ

“Today, your biggest consumers and customers of any fashion for that matter is your Gen Z generation that’s fast consuming. Now, how do we make sure that we can replace that, and the only way we can make sure we are able to replace that is to speak in their language, to design in their language, and to be able to bring information to them that’s in their language.”

“You have to make it aspirational. For youngsters, the way Zara is aspirational. You go to the villages, you talk about everything good. And then you realise that that kid who has 20 rupees, wants to run and buy a packet of chips because somebody advertises it well. They do not buy bananas, which may be more healthy. So you have to make the banana aspirational for them. So that’s how it is.”

“GenZ cares deeply about the climate, yet we witness the rise of ultra-fast fashion driven by social media trends like Outfit of the Day (OOTD). They seek fashion that reflects their uniqueness and creativity, which explains the rise in thrifting culture. Craft can play a crucial role here. It’s a story of two worlds—environmental consciousness and the longing for individuality—and craft holds the key to fulfilling those aspirations”

Barriers in craft sector

We have observed the legacy issues that the handloom and handicraft industry has faced since its inception. There are three major areas of concern. Firstly, the local ecosystem has deteriorated over time. Secondly, there is a need for design and technical support. And thirdly, we want to empower the artisans' community with basic education in design, business, and communication. Market connectivity is also crucial in our efforts. We are working to address these parameters and bring in sustainable practices for the craft and the entire community."

"The major problem I face is the pricing of yarn, as it keeps escalating without any fixed rate. This makes it challenging for production and pricing decisions, as yarn prices can change within six months. I believe there should be some marketing balances or regulations to control yarn prices. Hand-spun and natural fibres are expensive due to their uniqueness and the labour-intensive process, but people are not aware of their value and are unwilling to pay appropriately. Comparing our production to power loom textiles is unfair, as our process takes longer and produces less. There should be marketing regulations to promote traditional and natural yarns; otherwise, this art might slowly die out. Moreover, there is no protection for the term 'handloom,' and it's challenging for consumers to differentiate between power loom and handloom products. Just like silk has its tag, handlooms should also have protective measures to ensure transparency for customers."

"Loin loom is a very physically strenuous thing because they tie the loom around the waist, they sit on the floor and do it. So that has to have a different recognition. And another thing also, that people have got so used to acrylic yarn because of its availability, and cheap rate, that they have stopped using natural yarn. Most of my weavers complain that the preparation using natural yarn takes too much time. So we have to make it worth their while to encourage this so that we pay them the appropriate price."

"Synthetic yarns are readily available, and they find them easy to weave with as they don't bleed. So, I make an effort to show them the benefits of using organic materials, and how comfortable it is for the body and skin. It's slow progress".

"All of us are pointing towards the ecosystem problem that we see. In the Northeast, we have only one yarn processing unit, and that's not sufficient. We waste a lot of time and money getting yarns from outside the state, making the products expensive and less competitive in the market. Then, to cut costs, we reduce the wages of weavers, which isn't fair. We are pushing them towards larger production for the market, which leads to health issues and compromises the quality of life. It's a chain reaction that we have observed. So, the basic idea is to leverage the ecosystem and build a sustainable village economy like we had before. In the past, yarn was grown, spun, and dyed locally, creating a self-sustaining ecosystem. However, over time, this has deteriorated due to various policies. Now, we need to come back to building a strong ecosystem."

Importance of consumer awareness

"We do have a role to play. Providing the linkage to the market, we have been impacted. When the yarn price rises, it directly affects the fabric price for us, and then it becomes our responsibility to educate our customers. They question why our prices have increased by 20-30-40% compared to our last collection."

"I had this opportunity where a big brand took some of my handwoven stuff. However, big brands have a scanning system that rejects handwoven items with dropouts. It's a natural characteristic of handmade products. So, most of my sarees were rejected because of this. It's disheartening to see that these big fashion houses promote handloom without even understanding what it truly is."

"Our products are crafted from natural fibres, and we compete with items made of wood, plastic, acrylic, or ceramics. As you know, natural fibres require more care and protection from moisture. Unfortunately, my customers don't seem to understand this. They don't realise that these products are not plastic and need to be handled with extra care, if not too much, to avoid issues like fungus due to excessive moisture."

Powerloom and handloom

“Recently, the CMO of Assam announced that we should stop the powerloom gamosa and introduce the handloom version. However, in my own household, my mother buys around 50-60 gamosas. She tells me to get some when I return home. I try to explain to her that the cheapest handloom gamosa costs 250 rupees, but she insists she can get it for 100 rupees in the city. This shows that even she doesn’t understand the difference between handloom and power loom, which I believe is the case for 90% of our consumers.

Educating consumers about handloom is crucial as a first step. Only then can we discuss matters like scarcity of consumers and branding. Laymen cannot distinguish between a cheap and a decent quality gamosa, and naturally, they opt for the cheaper ones. “

“This is something happening all over our country, and it’s crucial to understand - Suddenly shutting down power looms is no solution, as many people are working in that industry. When I spoke to power loom weavers, they expressed their concerns about stopping their work. They fear that if they stop, they’ll face hunger, and people will turn to cheaper imports from other countries. We need to find a way to address it. Your point about distinguishing between handloom and power loom is important - then you consume what you want. Consumers should have the choice, but they need to understand the consequences of their choices. Instead of buying five cheap products, they could consider buying one quality handloom item. It is not happening today also because of consumerism”

“The Prime Minister in Varanasi said something that struck me. He emphasised the need to make handloom demand for those who valued handmade and let powerloom cater to everyone. The issue we are facing is that we are targeting the lower end of the market with handwoven products, causing problems. India produces 95% of the world’s handwoven textiles, but we haven’t captured the entire market. We mostly export carpets. There’s a vast untapped market abroad where people understand, appreciate, and value handwoven textiles. In the last 10 years, handloom brands like Raw Mango have grown 100% because they focused on design, tapped the right market, and priced their products appropriately to benefit the weavers. Design intervention and efficient market linkages are essential to improve the handloom sector.”

“Just telling the story of the weaver is also very good marketing. People will understand how the product is made and the hard work that goes into it. They’ll feel that it’s worth it after seeing the effort put in. I also wanted to emphasise that we are not against industrialization. It has to coexist with handloom. We need to be more aware of why we buy and what we buy. Powerloom and handloom can coexist, and we should be okay with that. There’s no point in opposing industrialization and rejecting anything that’s not handloom. We need to accept that both can exist together.”

“I would like to emphasise that not all handlooms are eco-friendly. While we should certainly compete with power looms, we must also ensure that our handloom practices are environmentally responsible. Just because it’s handloom doesn’t automatically mean it’s eco-friendly. We need to consider the impact on future generations and the environment. Are we using acrylic and chemical dyes that contribute to waste and soil degradation? These are the challenges we need to address rather than simply choosing between power looms and handlooms.”

Fast production vs slow production

“I think a lot of these discussions revolve around handling things from the perspective of small business owners. However, one major problem we face is the unchecked growth of fast fashion. We need to include fast fashion owners in our deliberations because we cannot truly impact how we produce, scale up or down, or what materials we encourage unless we address the limitless production and profit-seeking nature of fast fashion. They set the benchmark for our production deadlines and practices, and it’s not enough to focus solely on conscious and responsible business owners. Responsibility should be across all sectors of production.”

Need for defining sustainable and creating metrics

“I want to understand better what really categorises a brand as a slow fashion brand or a sustainable brand.”

“All these stages, from farm to fibre to fabric, and then all the dyeing processes... I mean, there is so much involved that maybe we should create a green index or something to determine how sustainable the ultimate garment is. It will have to go through so many stages that it will take a very long time to assess whether what I’m wearing is, say, 30% eco-friendly because of how the fibre was grown, how the fabric was made, and all of that.”

Education

“How can we introduce that into the curriculum? Make the younger generation more aware, interact more, be more appreciative of this traditional heritage. The other big advantage we have is also where we are talking about how artisans’ younger generation of artisanal families are moving away because of education, but I think that is a big advantage because if I have young students like them working with young educated people who come from artisanal families, I think that could make a great opportunity because both of them are seeking and looking at that craft in a completely different manner, not from a completely traditional mindset, but looking at how that could incorporate tradition and contemporary.”

“Connection also between craft and slow fashion and how you realise that there was something in the boxes, but we are already ticking most of those boxes, but we are not there as yet. I think that’s an important connection. Another thing, which we spoke about, which is interesting, is the trade-off. I don’t think anything is 100% sustainable or hundred percent best. These are decision-making points because whatever you’re doing, there will be a cost to the environment. There will be an impact on the artisans who are making it. So we have to just understand what the best option is going forward, but taking and I don’t think the objective is to tick all the boxes really, but to be able to work with communities and improve the impact that we’re making. And I think that’s important, and that’s why most of these brands are working, and they are succeeding, but they are not 100% environmentally friendly and have great wages and doing fantastic designs. I don’t think it’s all-in-one. We just have to find out our stories “

Storytelling and social media

“There’s a trend called De-influencing, where people embrace slow living, mindfulness, and reconnecting with their roots. These are great storytelling channels to reach out to. It’s not about making sales, but being more mindful of our choices and how we consume clothes. I hope the next generation will change the way we approach clothing, embracing collaborative systems, shared wardrobes, and mindful sourcing. If they seek an ethical outfit of the day, craft holds the key with its one-of-a-kind products. Bridging this narrative is vital for a sustainable fashion future.”

Social media was once a valuable avenue for creating our brand identity without heavy investments, but even that is slipping away due to changes in algorithms, limiting our reach and creativity. We are forced to create content of a certain type to reach the audience, and a lot of us cannot, even the concept of inclusivity will then come in there. What about neuro divergence?

Raising awareness among consumers and businesses

“When the yarn price rises, it directly affects the fabric price for us, and then it becomes our responsibility to educate our customers. They question why our prices have increased by 20-30-40 per cent compared to our last collection.”

“I had this opportunity where a big brand took some of my handwoven stuff. However, big brands have a scanning system that rejects handwoven items with dropouts. It’s a natural characteristic of handmade products. So, most of my sarees were rejected because of this. It’s disheartening to see that these big fashion houses promote handloom without even understanding what it truly is.”

“Our products are crafted from natural fibres, and we compete with items made of wood, plastic, acrylic, or ceramics. As you know, natural fibres require more care and protection from moisture. Unfortunately, my customers don’t seem to understand this. They don’t realise that these products are not plastic and need to be handled with extra care, if not too much, to avoid issues like fungus due to excessive moisture.”

“What I do generally is, in terms of craft, like we talk a lot when we talk theoretically, people don’t understand. Once when I went to Pragathi Maidhan, I met an eri-silk weaver. If you see the eri shawl, you will think it’s a cotton fabric. It looks like a coarse cotton fabric. So that lady was selling lots of stoles. Then I asked her, “Could you sell it?” Then she said that during the initial years when she used to go to the fair, it was very difficult. She didn’t know how to sell it because nobody could understand this was silk because it did not have the sheen. Then she realised she had once found one very old eri shawl which was worn out but woven by her grandma, which had this sheen. She started carrying that with her and showing this to the people. So this is the practical thing to do, when you show it to people, they easily understand and they start buying it.”

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