

# Tradition Fashion Interplay: An Imperative for Identity & Continuity

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Fashion in India, in its look and feel continues to be a part of the cultural fabric of India today away from the uniformly prescribed fashion code of global fashion. The parallel market of “indigenous clothing has retained itself and co-exists on its own terms with the contemporary” (Dhondy, 2010). The contemporary too draws confidently from this rich heritage effortlessly combining ‘new’ with ‘old’ retaining its core identity. There has of late been a shift to a more inclusive partnership between design and artisan community and clearer focus towards pushing the boundaries in fashion by exploring form, surface and material going beyond pure aesthetics.

Free from the burden of fashion history, new age designers in India are building successful partnerships with artisans where the artisans become true beneficiaries in the business. Meaning and value in the creation is drawn from the collective strength of skill, technique, and resources along with experiences.



Source: Rahul Reddy, 2010



Source: Authors own



Source: Authors own

This paper attempts to highlight how fashion as a practice can provide a context for crafts to benefit through integration into the ‘process of commerce and business, offering a way forward in socially responsible sustainable design environment’ (Clark, 2007). Having trained as a fashion designer and subsequently as an educationalist in India, the author is inevitably given to identifying patterns and mapping similarities across disciplines to make meaning out of its evolving material and fashion culture.

Fashion in its most fundamental definition represents 'a highly visual, image based industry' (Barthes, 1983) and introduces 'planned obsolescence' (Gopnik, 1994) that 'powers the economic engine in fashion' (Brannon, 2005). To balance the concept of 'built in obsolescence' (Gopnik, 1994) in fashion with 'socially responsible, sustainable medium of self as well as community expression is challenging' (Clark, 2007). Therein also lies an inherent danger of losing 'stylistic individuality' that cultures as India have over centuries been able to preserve and persevere (Kumar, 1999). However, 'radical innovations in our society can come from a change in the local systems' (Gwilt, 2009). Certain fashion practices in India have successfully created a bridge between the 'traditional' (and local) and 'the new' to build a more sustainable dialogue that builds on local practices and meaning.

While fashion affects most areas of design today, its greatest impact is on clothing (Clark 2007). Fashion and clothing occupy 7% of share in world export trade. Creation and diffusion of fashion is an established area of research in the west (Rinallo and Golfetto, 2006). Fashion today as a system of socio-cultural practices is highly layered, its origins over time have over time moved from a 'centralized' source (Rinallo and Golfetto, 2006) to sources that are 'diverse and polycentric' in nature (Braham, 1997). Undoubtedly, fashion knowledge and origins are gravitating towards newer centres that are attempting to establish their fashion identity in specific local and cultural context. The Indian fashion sector aligned with the vastness of India's textiles industry and enriched by its textile and clothing heritage too opens up wide scope for such sources to be determined and established in India.

Fashion is both an individual and a collective phenomenon (Breward and Evans 2005). The institutionalized system of fashion in India as understood from the perspective of the western countries is a rather 'nascent phenomenon' (Sengupta, 2009) as compared to the well-established system of the west (over 100 years old). India with its rich heritage and lineage, traditionally aligned with textiles and crafts, presents a unique complexity across its vast ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity that spans 28 states and 7 Union territories, which are comparable to a collection of countries as European Union (Indian Retail Report, 2009). The size of fashion industry in India is worth INR 1542.5 Billion (India Retail Report, 2010). The sheer scale of the industry makes it important enough for the Government to not ignore its importance. The scale of stakeholders and women in particular, involved in this industry from a cotton grower to a consumer is wide. Its impact on the economy therefore cannot be ignored.

Its growing economic strength, rising household income, expanding middle class of consumers with high aspirations and increased discretionary spending power, large segment of population belonging to the age group of less than thirty has created visible shifts in the way fashion is perceived and consumed (Tecknopak 2010).

Ideas and experiences in India are being cloned by rapid employment of science and technology. Aspirations and associations towards fashion therefore are extremely varied – traditional to transcultural. Despite the confusion and fusion of cultural identities,

new cultural strands are being revived to explore “traditional techniques in new ways” with the eye for “cultural values” through “new contemporary approaches to narrative, ornament and detail” specifically in reference to Indian fashion (Carlson, 2011). As elsewhere, Indian clothing<sup>1</sup> has also passed through a continuous process of creation, adaptation, recreation, reconstruction and assimilation (Steele, 2005) over time.

It has, however constantly drawn upon its rich cultural heritage to carve out a distinct niche in world of fashion by constantly referring to local cultural practices, values and meanings. An effort has been made to place emphasis on traditional practices incorporated by Indian designers, formulated around the ethos of experiences and local values thereby creating an indigenous fashion identity.

### **Fashion Evolution in India**

Design ethos in any society draws its identity from its culture, society and technology, ‘its genealogy embedded within its localized and indigenous traditions. The perception of a unique worldview is rooted within the confines of its localized habitat’ (Shastri, 2007).

Contemporary Indian design too is intimately linked to craft as a tradition. Historically, the word ‘Kala’ in Sanskrit portrays art and craft as one unified whole (Balaram, 1998). Ornamentation in crafts as a principal aesthetics has been inherent to Indian design tradition. These aesthetics were compatible to the Indian way of life.

The advent of industrialization over time created a divide between the craftsmen and the designer and the two started being viewed as two separate entities. The strong design identity assumed a different meaning due to increased political and cultural influence and ornamentation became a subset imposed by the external factors on Indian tradition, adapted differently from region to region. Design survived due to recognition of it as a profession but crafts became marginalized. However, the original ‘thread of individual aesthetic was never really lost’ (Kumar, 1999). Although overtime, design and craft interaction has been realized through many platforms -art, design, architecture in both education and practice and with time made fashionable. At best these initiatives are limited and have lacked the impact that should have accrued to the artisan community specifically in the fashion world.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Clothing’ as a term is more widely used in India while referring to historical evolution of culture specific clothes. ‘Apparel’ is a term used by the industry sector in India while ‘fashion’ has implications beyond clothing, widely understood and used by literature emanating from the west. While each of them is different, they share a certain similarity. In the context of this study all three have been referred to side by side, at times interchangeably. The goal of the paper is not to investigate these distinctions but to understand how fashion in India is informed by its socio-cultural context and tradition-fashion interplay constitutes new language of fashion identity.

Initially, the evolution of fashion in India leaned on mere re-interpretation of western styles in Indian materials or at best regurgitation of the traditional attire. Due to industrialization policies of the country, India's focus in the last 30 years had been on establishing systems that focused on fabrication of clothes for export requirements to western countries. Moreover in the initial years 'fashion' both as a word and as a concept denoted a deviation from the (domestic) norms of dress and in the feminine context, generally meant the adoption of alien dress and the wearing of western dress in the masculine context" (Joshi, 1992). This conforming mindset to a great extent had restricted the Indian fashion sector to have clear distinctions between 'traditional Indian' and 'fashionable Indian' (as a designer as well as a consumer) until lately. Fashion designers are exploring edgy with cultural connects, steeped in history; partial to textures and textiles from the country they are confidently travelling the path of universality in their design with Indian ethos.

Case studies have been drawn from the works of such designers where fashion-tradition interface is exemplified through design intervention in form, surface as well as material, training of artisans and promotional efforts to bring visibility at a macro-level. Examples are drawn from various design practices adopted by practicing designers where collaborative efforts between them and artisans have resulted in redefining the vocabulary of fashion identity that is as rich, diverse and exciting as discovering the country it represents.

### **Case Study of Upasana Design Studio**

A project by Uma Prajapati of Upasana Design Studio in Auroville, Pondichery, and South India is an effort to revive an age-old tradition of 'Varanasi'<sup>2</sup> weave, with origins in 'Varanasi', the holy town in India.

The 1000-year-old technique of weaving is rich with an elaborate motif, time consuming weaving process, which was expensive and had a heavy drape patronized by the Maharaja's at one time.

It's limited usage, expensive price-point in the modern context lead to reduced patronage overtime, even amongst the discerning consumers of fabric. A BBC broadcast in 2006, "50000 weavers in 'Varanasi' were displaced from their professions" was what prompted Uma to take up the cause of Varanasi weavers.

An initial diagnostic study lead to a deeper understanding of socio-economic issues that were plaguing the weavers of Varanasi weave. Economic Concerns like poor returns on the traditional profession, attractive alternative sources of income leading to youngsters not taking up the profession of their forefathers, stagnant wages for the past 15 years (Rs 800/--Rs 3500/-per month to feed a families with minimum 6 members), extremely long working Hours (8 hrs x 7 days), low output (one weaver takes 30 days to weave two

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<sup>2</sup> 'Varanasi'-Intricate silk weave practiced by skilled craftsmen of 'Varanasi' town, South India, India

sarees<sup>3</sup>) for every product that was woven, escalating raw materials as well as electricity cost made this profession an unviable proposition. To top it weavers who taken loan had a poor history of being able to return the loans which did not make them attractive for banks to offer loan. The reduced patronage of 'Varanasi' weave by consumers also contributed to making it unattractive profession overtime.

The social structure of the weaver community was found to be family based where man was viewed as the breadwinner. The social structure inhibited contribution of women in the profession. Poor exposure to newer technology, mindset of consumer expectations and material availability as well as no sharing of information amongst weavers had created a distant and singular professional environment. The benefits that could be accrued through a collective strength of a community were all lost.



**Weavers at work in Varanasi with designers Source: Pandey, 2008**

A survey of occupational concerns brought out certain facts that despite the prevailing difficult conditions weavers were well versed with all weaving techniques. They were also well versed with complicated 240 hook jacquard techniques. Poor exposure to export market was a deterrent to the possibilities of business generation that existed for them. A large number of weavers suffered from backaches and abdomen pain. In addition, poor lighting in loom sheds added to poor work space area. Poor knowledge of finishing process, no standardized dyeing and dependence on locally available colors for dyeing was another limiting practice.

Stagnancy in design further polarized its adoption amongst all age groups. What was a 'must buy' for a wedding trousseau had lost its appeal. Unattractive business

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<sup>3</sup> Sarees – Traditional draped garment worn by women

proposition had resulted in weavers leaving the craft to look for more lucrative opportunities.

The project objective was constituted by Bestseller Fund and Upasana Design Studio to create a feasible model for earning livelihood through capacity building and quality up gradation of the weaving community in 2006. The project consisted of providing design support, Survey of existing data, providing technical support to convert the design ideas and train manpower, creating the right production set – up for better sustainability in future and marketing and promotional activities to help connect to a wider set of consumers.

The project identified about 400 weavers primarily belonging to two villages (Madanpura and Pilikothi) of ‘Varanasi’ as the main beneficiaries. It was decided that attitude development and trust building with the weavers would be undertaken through the students from social institutes. Ten educated youths trained in communication and web was identified for training. Weavers were given exposure in micro financing to improve their financial management skills.

New looms were bought for them. They were provided with all the raw materials and assured commitment from the designer for one year. The entire family’s daily requirement of food and expenses were taken care of. These assurance boosted their otherwise deflated morale.

The team adopted an inclusive approach in design by including the craftsmen. The entire family was involved and trained by textile and fashion experts. While the men wove the fabric, the women developed the buttons and edgings. 160 women have been provided livelihood through sustained efforts of this project.



**Production team at work with the designers Source: Pandey, 2008**

Design consideration was an important factor while considering traditional weaves like

'Varanasi' weaves. 'Ambi'<sup>4</sup> (the mango shaped) motif was predominantly used with other typical motifs that over time had connotations of the 'old'. More importantly 'ambi' made the look of fabric dense and therefore more expensive to weave. Designers explored newer motifs from the repository of traditionally available motifs in 'Varanasi' weave. Traditional motifs like 'ambi' were discarded for 'patta'<sup>5</sup> (leaf shaped) with more global appeal while retaining 'Indianness'. Designer reworked the weave in a lighter weight silk material. The motifs were simplified and were spaced out in pattern layout to create visual lightness. The resultant fabric was lightweight with exquisite drape and touch, far less expensive while the emulating the richness and luminosity of the original weave.



**Pahadi Aam - 100% silk, Zari,  
Technique - Tanchoi  
Source: Pandey, 2008**



**Trichi - 100% silk, Zari,  
Technique - Tanchoi  
Source: Pandey, 2008**



**Hukum Kinara - 100% silk, Zari,  
Technique - Tanchoi  
Source: Pandey, 2008**

The design brief defined for conversion of the material had well defined parameters with emphasis on simplicity through cuts and silhouettes while retaining the classic appeal through patterns that were basic woven in rich textiles. Using innovation as a frame the underlying objective was to celebrate Indian sensibility. The material was further converted into contemporary styling inspired from Indian *Lehanga*<sup>6</sup>, *Cholis*<sup>7</sup>, *salwars*<sup>8</sup>, *Angarakhi's*<sup>9</sup> (all silhouettes from traditional Indian clothing). Fashion created thus assumes 'a cultural system of meanings and an ongoing process of communication' (Paulicelli and Clark, 2009) used by the designer to connect the craft to the larger audience. Showcased at various international forums it gained much appreciation at the 'Ethical Fashion Show' in Paris in 2008. The 'Varanasi' Weavers project was featured in UNESCO India magazine as an example of the "power of creativity for sustainable

<sup>4</sup> Ambi.-Mango shaped motif-the paisley pattern (lit. 'Unripe mango')

<sup>5</sup> Patta-a leaf shaped motif

<sup>6</sup> Lehanga-An Indian gathered skirt, usually flared

<sup>7</sup> Cholis – A women.s blouse or bodice, usually tight fitting

<sup>8</sup> Salwar-A baggy style of Pajama tapered at the ankle worn mainly in Punjab (India), Afghanistan and neighboring areas

<sup>9</sup> Angarakhi-A long sleeved, full skirted adopted from men's style, generally open at the chest and tied in the front with an inner flap covering the chest.

development,” depicting ‘Varanasi’ Weavers as a promising project, also gaining international recognition for the weavers of Banaras. A travelling textile-and-photo exhibition was set-up, which is being displayed in cities throughout India for better reach of success story (Pondicherry’s Maison Colombarie in February 2011).

Success from Paris generated orders for the designs. The weavers had taken two years to weave 5000 meters of fabric before this. This success ensured that they had to weave the same amount in three months. This demand resulted in involvement of more weavers and families. Secure in the knowledge of acceptability and continuation the weavers continue till today solely by the efforts of design community.



One of the final outcomes  
Source: Pandey, 2008



One of the final outcomes  
Source: Pandey, 2008

### **Case Study of Samant Chauhan, Knitwear Designer**

Material exploration in silk hand woven textiles from Bhagalpur by a designer Samant Chauhan is another case in point.

Bhagalpur town in Uttar Pradesh in North India has a history of producing ‘tussar<sup>10</sup>’ silk fabrics for over 200 years. Dogmatic and stagnant approach to mere production had relegated utilization of this material to a limited area of sari, dress material as well as coarse furnishings targeted to low-middle market reducing returns and limiting its popularity.

The designer identified the concerns plaguing the weaver community. These included poor financing and loan facility. The industry was dominated by agents who acted as middlemen and further reduced margins earned by the weavers in the supply chain. The infrastructure available to the weavers was found to be poor, including looms and dyeing facilities, which needed serious up-gradation. Poor testing and quality standards further added to the deteriorating standards. The grant provided by the government for the benefit of the weavers never reached the weavers. Stagnant designs and practice of Chinese silk yarn replacing the original silk fibre had made this weave unattractive and an inexpensive replica of something better. Poor connectivity of the region also added to the isolation of the original craft. Younger generations were seeking alternative sources of income that were found to be more attractive.



**Tussar Silk**

**Source: Samant Chauhan**

Any kind of design intervention in this craft community needed to consider larger socioeconomic issues for any kind of long-term sustainable intervention in the area. The situation was more complex since it involved inclusion of various other agencies.

The project planned adopted a two-pronged approach to design intervention. To innovate in the area of textile structure, experiment with knitting as a technique and

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<sup>10</sup> Tussar-A type of wild silk made in Eastern and Central India from hand spun yarns

surface embellishments on the material and train the manpower to continue the process of innovation in weaving.

Samant Chauhan started working with material in 2004. Trained as a Knitwear designer, Samant used his design training to innovate in fiber, weight and textile structures. The fibers were knitted and combined with new surfaces to completely change the character of the material. In this case as well, designing was an inclusive process with the weavers. Knitted silk over time has been recognized as an identity for Geographical Indicator for Bhagalpur silk.



**Minimalistic and Utopian**  
**Source: Samant Chauhan**

### **Experimentation and New look**

The material was further crafted into clean, minimalist, 'utopian street wear' to extend its meaning, usage and profits. Surface embellishments like block printing, tie and dye and embroideries were experimented with for the first time. The resultant look was very contemporary. In the case of 'Bhagalpur silk' the experimentation focus was on the weave structure and changing the overall look of the finished product. Design intervention that changes the very nature of the craft as a concern, has been voiced by many experts and scholars. However, for a cluster that employs 30,000-35,000 weavers, produce 1 million meters of fabric each year, this intervention has given a new lease of life and business extension.

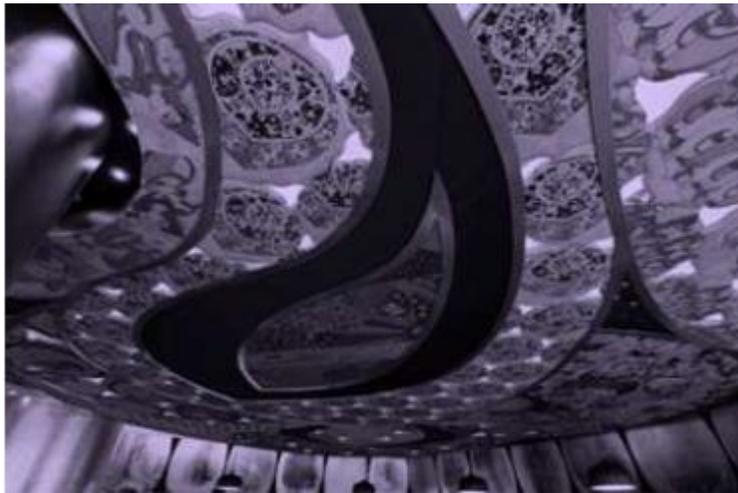
There is a surge in usage of 'Tussar' in the domestic apparel industry as well in addition to being exported to Europe, USA, Australia, and Africa. From material used for furnishings to high fashion garments, today, Bahgalpur 'Tussar' silk is available at several international high end stores like The Conran Shop (London), Barney's (NY), tsum (Moscow), t.a.o (Zurich) to name a few. Sustained promotional efforts through international and national fashion weeks expanded its global reach.

In this case Samant was able to web together and take advantage of agents of modern supply-chain for a large cluster like Bhagalpur. More importantly, the intervention

transformed material association and meaning with wider consumers. Novelty introduced in the material lead to the recognition of fashion change in 'Bhagalpur silk'.

### Case Study of Y-Wall Design Studio, Delhi

Extending the boundaries of traditional crafts in fashion lifestyle is the example of 'Ruby Ceiling' designed for 'The Park' hotel in Hyderabad, South India by Y-Wall. Y-Wall is a multi-disciplinary design practice founded in 2008 in New Delhi. As a part of project undertaken for designing space for 'The Park', Y-Wall incorporated an exemplary example of storytelling as a part of traditional folklore in '*Kalamkari*'<sup>11</sup> in the design of the ceiling of the hotel. This intervention provided a new approach to designing meaningful experiences using traditional craft.



**Ruby Ceiling, Y-Wall**      **Source: Preksha Baid**

'Kalam' (pen) 'kari' (work) is a type of hand painted or block printed method of painting on natural dyes onto cotton or silk fabric with a bamboo pen (Kalam). A skilled craft passed down from generations in *Sri Kalahasti*<sup>12</sup>, town in Andhra Pradesh, South India depicts scenes from *Puranas*<sup>13</sup>, *Ramayana*<sup>14</sup> and *Mahabharata*<sup>15</sup>. The process of 'Kalamkari' is fairly elaborate and involves washing, rinsing, soaking and bleaching of muslin cloth and applying mordants and dyes made from natural substances (indigo is used for blue, madder for red, mango bark and dried myrobalan fruit for yellow, rusted iron for black and so on). The process of dyeing the fabric can take several days to complete. The pieces can be hand drawn or block printed depending on the size and scale of the artwork.

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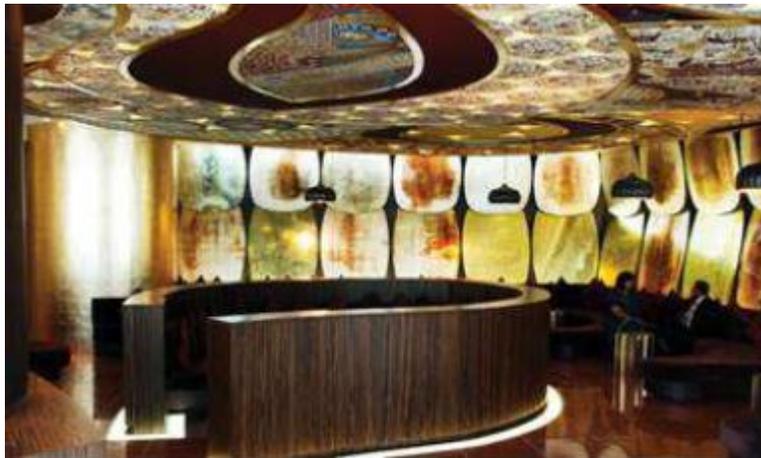
<sup>11</sup> Kalamkari-Painted cloth(as a trade term it is referred to both painted and printed cloth

<sup>12</sup> Sri-Kalahast-Noted for wall hangings with mythological tales and characters

<sup>13</sup> Puranas-A genre of important Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religious texts

<sup>14</sup> Ramayana-Sanskrit epic of ancient India

<sup>15</sup> Mahabharat-Sanskrit epic of ancient India



**Ruby Ceiling, Y-Wall Source: Preksha Baid**

The designer chose to work upon the ceiling since ‘ceilings are a great way of storytelling, a living example of the past’ as stated by Preksha Baid, designer of Y-Walls. The ceiling design was adorned with a procession of Gods and goddesses combining Sri Kalahast style with floral imprints of *Machilipatam*<sup>16</sup> styles. The ceiling represents an example of unification in fragmentation in contemporary Indian design as the designer took an approach of piecing a puzzle to achieve 12 metre X 13 metre long ceiling. The craft is struggling for survival and its patronage amongst the young is dismal. Many of the socio-economic problems identified in the previous craft clusters were found to afflict this weaver community as well. The patterns in the ceiling represented different styles of ‘Kalamkari’ that have evolved over a period of time, a resplendent canvas of its evolution applied to a contemporary setting.

The designer used the craft as space and the result magnified its grandeur and meaning, making it fashionable while opening new avenues for artisans to practice craft in another segment.

## **Conclusion**

Case studies presented in the paper are not exhaustive but have shown that sustained efforts by design community have resulted in integrating craft community with mainstream consumers while making a fashion statement.

The multi pronged approach has created economic benefits for all stakeholders forming systems of training that enables continuation, non-dependence and quality deliverance within a mainstream supply-chain cycle while ensuring ingenuity of final creation signifying ‘Indianness’ and preservation of socio-cultural structure of the community involved in the process. Such interventions also bring social benefits into local

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<sup>16</sup> Machilipatam-Block print and hand painted using decorative florals and vegetal designs

community, providing much needed employment and above all social esteem. Importantly in all three cases the catalyst was an outsider.

Craft and Tradition is being seen as fashionable. These examples also provide a glimpse as to how the partnership has further resulted in reviving and integrating the crafts community and artisan, making traditional craft more trendy and contemporary thereby connecting to the young consumers. The continuation of craft practices in a language that connects with generation-Y in India has ensured that the craft survives and remains meaningful. In addition the products created have given a cultural association and a distinct identity to Generation-Y in India as opposed to the cloning culture offered by most fast fashion international brands. The new consumer is young, successful twenty something seeking pride through connectivity and meaning-an anti-thesis to the culture of fast fashion. These examples also reflect how meaningful fashion identity is being constructed through the end products rather than being forcibly imposed by the fashion industry.

At times such interventions have revived a craft while at others it has shown ways for continuity and connectivity. As an educationist I have come across and been involved in many projects where the craft documentation or design intervention is carried out within the academic structure. Such approaches form cornerstones of inculcating sensitivity towards craft for a design professional. But it is this foundation that eventually leads to sustained commitment as typified by the case studies illustrated. All the three designers mentioned are graduates of the National Institute of Fashion Technology where the learning woven into the curriculum of design education towards craft sensitivity created seeds of responsible design practice in the early years.

These examples also demonstrate that there is definite potential for such approaches to establish a new direction in fashion that integrates local practices, values and skills thereby celebrating uniqueness, diversity through local resources and systems to establish more sustainable design practice. Conglomerations of skills in cities around which fashion communities exist sometimes miss these crucial collaborations that tend to compete for the mundane rather than the diverse.

In conclusion artisan-designer collaboration in India are creating newer directions in responsible fashion by integrating indigenous and diverse to carve out a distinct identity in global fashion system. Connectivity, continuity and inclusivity alone can create more sustainable business models and recognition of Indian identity on a global fashion map.

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***This article was originally published in "Fashion Colloquia - London, September, 2011".***