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SUSTAINING FASHION ... UN-SUSTAINING CULUTURE?

TRACING COLONIAL LEGACIES TO SUSTAIN INDIAN
CONTEMPORARY FASHION

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ABSTRACT

Within the modern design practices aiming for sustainable fashion, the handmade holds a unique position in the Indian context, compelling to extend the debate from which practices are relatively more sustainable to what forms of sustainability are relatively more relevant. The cruciality of this discussion arises not from the extremely topical subject of sustainability but the irony that the concept has existed in India much before the proliferation of the term itself.

The permanent after-effect of the colonial emancipation is that India being the post-colonial nation has always found itself in a race to integrate with the global economy, to **bring** Indian culture to the forefront. While the design discourse today aims to elevate the artisanal communities of the country by bringing (back) handcrafted fashion under the limelight, these efforts to achieve social, economic and environmental sustainability fail to analyse the underlying colonial legacies that manifest in subtle ways that encumber cultural sustainability. To begin crafting a sustainable future, it is extremely prudent to (re)look at the sustainable past that was impacted by an elaborate history of colonialism. Whereas the external colonial factors rising from a 'civilized West' are visibly traceable, there is a severe lack of perspective on legacies of the colonial past that are inextricably internalized - in a post-colonial capitalist economy that seeks to strike a balance between its own 'traditional **past**' and a 'modern **future**.'

In the matrix of textile crafts, fashion and sustainability, this investigation analyses the ideological frameworks of contemporary Indian fashion that aims for a global appeal. Apart from gaps in production methods in the fashion industry, this research examines cultural negotiations in addressing sustainability that impact the existing systemic inequalities. Embedded in case studies of two popular contemporary lifestyle brands Fabindia and Jaypore, the inquiry focuses on fashion disseminated to the urban middle/upper-middle classes as per their imaginations of modernity that shape and are shaped by cultural conditions. Further, the study reveals the socio-economic effects encountered in commoditizing indigenous crafts at a large scale, and the cultural implications in bringing the 'rural' artisan and the Indian 'village' under a national and international spotlight.

Founded on critical studies on colonial history, postcolonialism and fashion theories, this design research is structured to unpack intrinsic colonial patterns wherein contemporary sustainable fashion practices are evaluated by drawing parallels with historical examples.

Keywords: crafts, sustainable, contemporary, fashion, colonial, culture