

A Role of Higher Education in Fashion Design: Policy-Driven Strategies for Sustainable Fashion Futures and Handloom Heritage

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Abstract—India’s handloom sector, one of the oldest and most culturally significant textile traditions, sustains rural livelihoods and supports sustainable production but faces challenges such as declining artisan numbers, raw material shortages, and limited integration with modern fashion education. This study examines the role of higher education in preserving handloom heritage through policy-based interventions. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combines fieldwork in Ilkal and Guledgudda (Karnataka) with survey data from fashion design students.

Field visits captured artisans’ perspectives on raw material supply, labour costs, skill transfer, and pandemic-related disruptions, while surveys evaluated students’ views on industry exposure, artisan collaboration, and entrepreneurial potential. Policy review covered the National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP), Handloom Mark Scheme, SFURTI, and vocational learning provisions under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Findings highlight a gap between policy intent and implementation, particularly in fostering sustainable artisan–designer partnerships. The study recommends integrating structured artisan engagement, craft cluster immersion, and collaborative design projects into higher education curricula. Such initiatives can bridge policy, markets, and craft communities, while enhancing cultural preservation, improving student employability, and supporting sustainable artisan livelihoods.

Index Terms—Handloom Heritage, Higher Education, Sustainable Fashion, Policy Frameworks, Artisan–Designer Collaboration

I. INTRODUCTION

Vibrantly positioned at the crossroads of creativity, culture, and business, higher education in fashion design in India has grown into a field that combines artistic ideas with practical skills, industry experience,

and heritage preservation. Leading institutions like the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), National Institute of Design (NID), and many universities offer programs that cover design principles, textile studies, technology, and market knowledge. With India’s rich craft traditions, fashion education now focuses more on sustainability, working with artisans, and encouraging entrepreneurship. Following the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, these programs prepare students to connect traditional skills with global fashion needs. India’s handloom heritage, rooted in centuries-old weaving traditions, is a cornerstone of the nation’s cultural identity and a vital contributor to rural livelihoods. Renowned for its diversity—ranging from Ilkal and Khun weaves in Karnataka to Maheshwari sarees in Madhya Pradesh—the sector embodies sustainable, low-impact production practices. However, in an era of globalized fashion, preserving this heritage requires stronger integration with fashion design education. By linking craft traditions with contemporary design thinking, higher education can nurture innovation while safeguarding authenticity. Fashion design programs have the potential to create platforms where artisans and emerging designers collaborate, blending traditional techniques with modern aesthetics and market strategies. Such collaborations not only enhance product appeal in both domestic and international markets but also open entrepreneurial opportunities for graduates. Embedding craft-based projects, field visits, and policy awareness into curricula can ensure that handloom heritage remains relevant and resilient in shaping sustainable fashion futures.

The future of fashion design in India is increasingly shaped by policy initiatives that align sustainability,

skill development, and cultural preservation. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes vocational learning, experiential pedagogy, and industry partnerships, fostering a multidisciplinary approach that allows fashion design students to integrate heritage crafts with contemporary design, technology, and entrepreneurship (Ministry of Education, 2020). Likewise, the National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP) focuses on infrastructure enhancement, marketing assistance, and technological upgrades for handloom clusters, opening avenues for higher education institutions to engage students in live projects and collaborative innovations (Ministry of Textiles, 2022). The Handloom Mark Scheme further reinforces authenticity in production, enabling designers to build consumer trust while preserving craft integrity (Office of Development Commissioner for Handlooms, 2021).

Additional schemes strengthen this ecosystem. The Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries (SFURTI) supports cluster-based development, creating space for fashion design students to contribute to product diversification and innovation (Ministry of MSME, 2022). The National Technical Textiles Mission (NTTM) bridges heritage with advanced textile technologies, while Geographical Indication (GI) protections safeguard traditional identities such as Banarasi, Kanjeevaram, and Ilkal, preventing cultural misappropriation (Government of India, 2021). Collectively, these policies form a framework where higher education acts as a conduit between artisans, markets, and policy, ensuring fashion design remains commercially viable while sustaining India's handloom heritage.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the role of higher education in preserving India's handloom heritage within the fashion design sector. Mixed-methods research is particularly suitable for heritage and education studies as it enables triangulation of data, combining statistical evidence with in-depth contextual insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The qualitative strand captures artisan perspectives, challenges, and skill

transmission practices, while the quantitative strand measures student perceptions of industry exposure, artisan engagement, and entrepreneurship opportunities. The research is both exploratory, to uncover under-documented areas of artisan–designer collaboration, and descriptive, to document existing practices and policy implications (Silverman, 2020).

Primary data collection involved field visits to significant handloom clusters in Ilkal and Guledgudda (Karnataka), identified for their cultural importance and historical weaving traditions (Ministry of Textiles, 2022). These visits incorporated direct observation of weaving processes and semi-structured interviews with artisans focusing on raw material availability, labor costs, skill transmission, market linkages, and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Complementary quantitative data were gathered through structured surveys administered to fashion design students from multiple higher education institutions across India, capturing responses on industry exposure, engagement with artisan clusters, and entrepreneurial aspirations. Secondary sources included government policy documents—such as the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2020), National Handloom Development Programme, Handloom Mark Scheme, SFURTI—and scholarly literature on sustainable fashion and design education (Clark, 2020).

Purposive sampling was used to select artisan clusters with significant handloom heritage, ensuring cultural relevance, while stratified sampling was applied to student participants to ensure representation across geographic regions, academic levels, and institution types (Etikan et al., 2016). Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and percentages, whereas qualitative interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and challenges (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, a policy gap analysis was conducted to compare the intended outcomes of relevant government initiatives with field observations. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity of respondents, and maintaining cultural sensitivity in documenting traditional weaving practices (BERA, 2018).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative findings revealed that a significant proportion of fashion design students recognized the value of artisan engagement, with 54.1% strongly agreeing and 35.2% agreeing that artisans can serve as a strong support system for emerging designers. Similarly, 77% strongly agreed and 18.9% agreed on the importance of industrial connections such as internships, partnerships, and collaborations with brands. However, perceptions of institutional support were more varied, with only 14.8% strongly agreeing and 30.3% agreeing that their institutions provide sufficient industry exposure, while 42.6% remained neutral and 12.3% disagreed. Qualitative data from field visits indicated that artisans face challenges including raw material shortages, increased labor costs, declining skill transmission, and reduced market access, particularly post-pandemic.

The results suggest a gap between the recognition of the importance of artisan–designer collaborations and the practical opportunities available to students. The mixed perceptions of institutional support indicate that while some programs offer meaningful industry linkages, many still lack structured engagement with artisan clusters. This aligns with previous studies highlighting limited integration of heritage crafts into design curricula (Clark, 2020). Field observations further reveal that without targeted policy interventions and curriculum reforms aligned with NEP 2020, both artisans and students may miss opportunities for mutual growth. Strengthening live projects, craft cluster immersions, and joint entrepreneurship initiatives could bridge this gap, ensuring sustainable livelihoods for artisans while enhancing student employability.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of higher education in fashion design in preserving India's handloom heritage while fostering sustainable industry practices. Findings reveal a strong student recognition of artisan engagement and industrial connections as essential for professional growth, yet institutional support remains inconsistent. Field insights underscore persistent artisan challenges, including raw material shortages, rising costs, and skill

decline. Bridging policy frameworks like NEP 2020 and on-ground realities requires embedding structured artisan collaborations, live projects, and craft cluster immersions into design curricula. Such integration can simultaneously enhance student employability, promote entrepreneurship, and safeguard cultural heritage, ensuring that handloom traditions remain vibrant in India's sustainable fashion future.

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