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Beyond the Catwalk

How Politics Shapes the Global and Indian Fashion Economy

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*“The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life.”— Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 36*

In the world of fashion, the clothes we wear often speak volumes about the political, cultural, and economic forces that shape our society. As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels observed, **material realities are intricately linked to our consciousness**, and nowhere is this more evident than in the fashion industry. Consider the 2006 film *The Devil Wears Prada*, where the protagonist, Andrea, is thrust into the high-stakes world of fashion, only to realise that the seemingly superficial choices made in the industry - from magazine covers to runway designs - are deeply entwined with power, influence, and political agendas. The fashion industry is not just about trends or individual expression; it is a **reflection of broader societal dynamics**, from labour practices and trade policies to social justice movements. Similarly, in India, where tradition and modernity collide, fashion becomes a site for political and economic negotiations, with designers and brands navigating global markets while preserving cultural identity.

Ultimately, fashion is not merely about aesthetics; it is shaped by and, in turn, shapes the political and economic currents of our time. From **global supply chains** and **trade policies** to **movements for social justice** and **environmental sustainability**, fashion serves as both a reflection of and a response to the forces that influence our world, on both a global and local scale. One of the most significant ways politics influences the fashion industry is through global trade policies, tariffs, and labour laws, which determine the flow of goods, materials, and labour across borders. The fashion industry's reliance on international trade means that decisions made by governments regarding tariffs or trade agreements can have a profound effect on what we wear. For instance, during the **U.S.-China trade war in 2018**, tariffs on textiles and apparel resulted in a significant reshaping of global supply chains, with brands seeking alternative manufacturing countries like Vietnam or Bangladesh to sidestep the financial burden (Buchanan, 2023). Similarly, international trade agreements, such as the European Union's free trade deals and the **U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)**, have influenced how fashion brands source materials, manage production, and access foreign markets (Crane, 2000;

Buchanan, 2023). These political forces impact both the **cost of production** and the **accessibility of markets**, ultimately shaping what consumers around the world purchase.

Further, diving deeper into the intricacies of labour laws reveals their crucial role in shaping the global fashion economy. As fashion brands outsource production to countries with lower labour costs, they often operate in regions with less stringent labour protections, which raises ethical and political concerns. For example, in **Bangladesh** and **Cambodia**, where labour laws are more relaxed, fashion companies can produce garments at a lower cost, but the working conditions often come under scrutiny (Chan & Wong, 2012). Movements like the **Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety**, which was established after the **Rana Plaza collapse** in 2013, reflect the political pressure for reform in these areas (Webb, 2024). Growing awareness of **workers' rights** and **ethical production practices** has forced governments and companies to address these issues, and the political will to improve labour standards is now a driving force for change in global fashion.

At the same time, major fashion hubs like Paris, Milan, and New York hold significant sway in shaping the global fashion market, not just because of their cultural influence but also due to their political environments. In Paris, for example, the **French government's push for sustainability** has led luxury fashion brands like Chanel and Louis Vuitton to adopt more eco-friendly practices, such as using sustainable materials and reducing their carbon footprints (Özdil & Konuralp, 2024). Milan, as Italy's fashion capital, has seen Gucci and Prada commit to more sustainable production, with efforts like using recycled materials and supporting the **Fashion Pact** (Webb, 2024). In New York, the city's progressive stance on inclusivity and labour rights has influenced brands like Tory Burch and Ralph Lauren to focus on diversity and ethical production practices. The political decisions made in these cities—from environmental regulations to labour rights—resonate globally, shaping how fashion is produced, marketed, and consumed worldwide.

Furthermore, fashion also acts as a powerful tool for **political expression**, where clothing choices become symbols of resistance, identity, and activism. For example, during the **Black Lives Matter movement**, clothing became a form of protest and solidarity. Activists and supporters wore t-shirts emblazoned with the phrase “Black Lives Matter” to demand racial justice and equality. The fashion industry itself responded, with brands like Nike and Adidas using their platforms to support the cause, creating limited-edition collections to amplify the message of social change (The Economic Times, 2024). Hence, fashion not only reflects the political climate but also has the power to challenge and shape it, turning everyday clothing into symbols of defiance and unity.

Shifting from the global stage to the local context, fashion in India has long been intertwined with political expression and cultural identity. During the British colonial rule, clothing became a powerful

tool for resistance. One of the most iconic examples is the use of *khadi*, the hand-spun, handwoven fabric promoted by Mahatma Gandhi. In the fight for independence, *khadi* was more than just a fabric—it was a symbol of self-reliance and a rejection of British economic dominance. Gandhi ji's insistence on wearing *khadi* and encouraging Indians to adopt it was a direct challenge to British-made textiles and an assertion of India's cultural autonomy. This historical use of clothing as a form of **political activism** set the foundation for the unique relationship between fashion and politics in India, where style has long been a form of social commentary.

The tradition of using fashion as a form of political expression continues to resonate today, as modern Indian designers use their work to reflect the country's evolving political and cultural landscape. Designers like Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Anita Dongre, and Manish Malhotra have elevated Indian textiles and traditional crafts to the global stage, blending heritage with contemporary design (Aggarwal & Vohra, 2021). Their work has not only gained international acclaim but also redefined what Indian fashion represents in a globalised world. Sabyasachi's use of intricate embroidery and *banarasi* silks, for example, **celebrates Indian craftsmanship** while also asserting a distinct cultural identity. Similarly, Anita Dongre's commitment to eco-friendly and sustainable fashion highlights a growing **political consciousness about environmental responsibility**, while **promoting indigenous craft traditions**. As Indian fashion garners global attention, it is increasingly seen as a form of cultural and political assertion. The rise of Indian designers has led to a resurgence of interest in traditional textiles like *khadi*, *silk*, and *kalamkari*, not just as fashion statements, but as **expressions of national pride**. The global appeal of these designs is a reflection of a broader shift in global fashion toward valuing **authenticity** and **sustainability**. Wearing Indian-made garments or supporting Indian designers has become a way for consumers to engage with cultural and political movements, as these designers bring India's rich heritage into the contemporary fashion conversation.

At the same time, political policies in India continue to play a crucial role in shaping the fashion industry. The ***Make in India* campaign**, for instance, encourages designers and manufacturers to prioritise local production and reduce reliance on imports, while the ***Atmanirbhar Bharat*** push aims to enhance self-reliance by promoting the domestic textile and apparel sector (Shah, 2019). Designers such as Falguni Shane Peacock and Masaba Gupta have responded by incorporating traditional fabrics like *chikan* and *khadi* into their collections, celebrating India's textile heritage while aligning with these national initiatives. The government's ***Textile Policy 2020*** seeks to improve the sector's competitiveness, encouraging the adoption of advanced technologies and fostering growth in both domestic and export markets. In addition to these policies, the ***Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana*** (PMKVY), which focuses on skill development, has had a direct impact on the fashion workforce by encouraging training programs aimed at improving the skill set of workers in the textile

and garment sector (NITI Aayog, 2023). As a result, many fashion entrepreneurs and artisans are now better equipped to meet international standards, enabling Indian fashion to compete globally. However, these policies also come with their challenges, particularly regarding labour rights. States like Tamil Nadu, which is a major garment manufacturing hub, still face issues related to exploitation of workers in the unorganised sector, where low wages and poor working conditions persist. As India pushes for economic growth and self-sufficiency, ensuring that these advances also translate into better labour practices will be crucial to the future sustainability of the fashion sector.

Moreover, building on the growing demand for sustainability and transparency, the rise of **thrift culture** and **consumer activism** is further transforming the Indian fashion industry, mirroring global movements like **#BuyNothingNew** and **Slow Fashion**. As young, socially-conscious consumers increasingly prioritise ethical consumption, second-hand clothing, thrift markets, and online resale platforms are becoming integral parts of the fashion landscape. This shift away from fast fashion is not only reducing waste but also promoting a more **circular fashion economy**—one where the life cycle of garments is extended through reuse, repair, and recycling, reducing the need for new production and minimising environmental impact. Globally, movements advocating for sustainability, such as the Fashion Revolution and **#WhoMadeMyClothes**, are pushing brands to disclose their supply chains and improve labor conditions, influencing Indian consumers to demand similar transparency (Shah, 2019; Özdil & Konuralp, 2024). The growing appeal of vintage, up-cycled, and locally sourced garments has also paved the way for small businesses and independent brands to thrive, offering unique, sustainable alternatives to mass-produced clothing. These smaller enterprises, both locally and globally, are aligning with the values of conscious consumerism, focusing on handmade, eco-friendly products, and contributing to a circular economy by creating new opportunities for artisans and designers to showcase their work (Chan & Wong, 2012).

In conclusion, the relationship between politics and fashion continues to evolve into a dynamic space where **creativity**, **culture**, and **responsibility** intersect. As global and local movements continue to advocate for sustainability, ethical production, and cultural preservation, fashion is increasingly being recognised as a force for positive change. The future of the industry lies in its ability to adapt to growing consumer demand for transparency and sustainability, with **small businesses** and **local artisans** playing a key role in shaping a more conscious and inclusive market. With the rise of new technologies and a shift toward more ethical production practices, fashion has the potential to lead the way in promoting environmental and social responsibility. As we look ahead, fashion will continue to serve as a powerful medium for expressing values and forging connections, offering a path toward a more sustainable and equitable future for both creators and consumers alike.

***Author's Note:** While this article draws upon the references listed, it is not exclusively based on them. The citations serve to support and provide context for the ideas discussed, but the article is largely an independent exploration of the topic.

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