

# Craft, Care and the Self: Fashion as a Reflective and Expressive Practice

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## ABSTRACT

Craft has long been studied in India as an economic resource, a heritage practice, or a tool for rural upliftment. What has received far less attention is how craft functions as a practice of self-expression, ethical engagement, and relational care—particularly within Indian fashion education. This paper attempts to address that gap.

The study draws on semi-structured qualitative interviews with three practitioners: a craft-based designer, an embroidery artist, and a fashion educator, supplemented by reflective observation of expressive making workshops in institutional settings in India and Denmark. The paper argues that craft, as a relational and embodied practice, offers a framework for fashion educators to develop care, critical awareness and ethical responsibility in students.

The research studies Indian craft traditions, specifically Kantha embroidery and Jamdani weaving from West Bengal, in regard to care ethics, feminist craft scholarship, and material culture. Thematic analysis of interview data and field notes produces four themes: craft as negotiation of the self, slowness and embodied reflection, craft as everyday agency, and craft as relational care. The study concludes that fashion pedagogy at institutions such as NIFT would benefit from a deeper engagement with craft as a lived, socially embedded, and ethically situated practice, rather than primarily as a technical or heritage-orientated discipline.

**Keywords:** craft pedagogy, care ethics, Indian craft traditions, slow fashion, Kantha embroidery, reflective practice, fashion education, embodied knowledge, design education, tacit knowledge

## INTRODUCTION

Indian craft traditions sit at a peculiar intersection. They are routinely celebrated as cultural heritage, studied as rural livelihoods, and integrated into design curricula. What they are rarely treated as—within academic literature or institutional practice—is a medium through which makers negotiate their sense of self, form ethical relationships with materials and communities, and practice a particular kind of care. This paper is concerned with that underexplored dimension.

The mainstream fashion industry has come under sustained criticism over the past two decades. Questions about environmental degradation, precarious labour, and emotional disconnection from clothing have pushed designers, educators, and researchers to seek alternatives. Craft has re-emerged in this context—not simply as a nostalgic counterpoint to industrial production but as a mode of making that demands slowness, attention, and relational responsibility (Fletcher, 2014; Entwistle, 2000). Yet much of the existing scholarship on craft either frames it as heritage requiring preservation or as an economic resource for artisan communities. Both concerns are legitimate. But they leave untouched a fundamental question: what happens to the person who makes it?

How does sustained material engagement shape the subjectivity of a practitioner? How does craft situate the maker in relation to material, tradition, and social context? These have direct implications for how craft is taught and experienced within institutions like the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Kolkata. Even though craft occupies a prominent position in the curriculum, its holistic significance remains unexamined. This

paper argues that the understanding of craft as embodied and relational, as opposed to technical, provides fashion education with a meaningful framework to develop ethical awareness and personal responsibility.

The argument rests on three forms of scholarship. Sennett (2008) understands craft as a commitment that demands care where repetition builds judgement rather than boredom, and attention to material becomes a form of self-knowledge. Ingold (2013) proposes that making is not the execution of a prior design but an ongoing conversation between the maker and the material. Ghosh (2020), writing specifically about Kantha embroidery in colonial Bengal, shows that women's needlework was never simply domestic labour; it was an assertion of memory, identity, and voice. These perspectives form the conceptual core of what follows. The study pursues four objectives:

- a) To examine craft as a reflective and expressive practice
- b) To investigate Kantha and Jamdani's care ethics and material culture
- c) To analyse expressive craft in institutional contexts
- d) To propose how craft pedagogy at Indian fashion institutions might be reconceived.

The paper doesn't answer these questions but opens them more carefully, attending to what practitioners say, what they do, and what the gap between the two reveals.

### Research Gap and Scholarly Contribution

A considerable body of work exists on Indian craft as economic practice (Bakshi, n.d.; Bissett-Johnson and Moorhead, 2019), as a heritage and cultural identity (Ghosh, 2020; Palit, 2023), or as a site for design collaboration (Palit, 2021). What is missing in the literature is the interior dimension of craft—how it shapes the practitioner's sense of self, how it produces ethical relationships between people and materials, and how these dimensions might inform fashion pedagogy in India.

Internationally, scholars such as Sennett (2008), Ingold (2013), and Gauntlett (2018) have examined craft as a practice of self-formation. Care ethics scholars, including Noddings (1984), Tronto (1993), and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), have explored the relational dimensions of making. Notably, Parker (1984) has examined how feminist craft scholars have simultaneously devalued and politically charged women's needlework. But these frameworks have rarely been applied to Indian fashion education, where craft is taught by institutions, mediated by caste and gender, and often shaped by market pressures that work against the very slowness and attentiveness that render its meaning. This paper contributes to an emerging conversation about craft pedagogy in postcolonial design education (Patel, 2021; Sharma and Mehta, 2022) by examining what three practitioners actually say and do—and what their experiences reveal about the possibilities and limits of craft-based learning in an institutional setting.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Craft as Embodied Practice and Self-Formation

Sennett (2008) argues that craft is not primarily about objects. It is about the cultivation of skill through sustained, attentive practice. Repetition builds judgement – the craftsperson who makes the same gesture a thousand times does not become numb; they become attuned. Ingold (2013) takes this further: making is not the execution of a plan but a process of responding to material—to its grain, texture, resistance, and possibility. Knowledge emerges through doing, not before it. Gauntlett (2018) argues that making connects people with themselves, with each other, and with their communities in ways that consumption alone cannot, extending these ideas into the social realm.

Entwistle (2000) and Woodward (2007) have demonstrated in fashion studies that clothing serves as a mediator between individual identity and social structures, embodying memory, habit, and social placement. Willett et al. (2022) examined how material involvement and emotional investment might alter consumer relationships with

fast fashion paradigms. Hochscheid and Russell (2023) delineate three prevalent motifs in craft experience across cultures: self-identification, environmental control, and the social aspects of produced space.

All three appear in the practitioner accounts that follow.

### **Care Ethics and the Politics of Making**

Care ethics, associated with Noddings (1984) and Tronto (1993), understands care not as sentiment but as practice: to care is to attend, to respond, and to take responsibility. Applied to craft, this framework illuminates how making involves not only technical competence but also sustained attention to material, process, and the social context in which an object will be used. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) argues that care in the making cannot be romanticised; it must be actively cultivated, and it can fail. Adamson (2013) observes that post-colonial cultural politics in India have frequently deployed craft as a marker of national authenticity without attending to the inequalities that structure actual craft production. Parker (1984) demonstrates how women's needlework has historically been framed as natural and domestic, which has devalued both the skill and the labour. These are not simply historical observations; they remain relevant to how Kantha artisans and Jamdani weavers in West Bengal are positioned within contemporary markets and design institutions.

### **Indian Craft Traditions: Care, Labour, and the Market**

Ghosh (2020) shows how women in colonial Bengal stitched worn textiles into Kantha quilts, which embodied memory, belief and visual intelligence – not just decorative objects, but statements of agency passed down through generations. Palit (2023) traces Kantha's later move from household practice to global commodity, demonstrating how design institutions, NGOs and market forces have reshaped both practice and meaning, marked by both genuine achievement and genuine loss. Kumar (2015), writing on artisans in Banaras, illustrates how devotion to craft often coexists with economic precarity, a tension equally apparent among Jamdani weavers in West Bengal who have transitioned to faster production methods under market pressure. Patel (2021) and Sharma and Mehta (2022) argue that design pedagogy in postcolonial contexts often reproduces power asymmetries between urban designers and rural artisans, without sufficient reflection on whose knowledge is being mobilised and for whose benefit.

### **Slow Fashion, Emotional Durability, and Craft Pedagogy**

Chapman (2005) opined that materials are more likely to be retained, maintained, and valued over time to which people form genuine emotional attachments. In a recent study, Jung and Jin (2022) confirm that handcrafted and bespoke clothing, produced in a slow process, certainly predicts well-being across diverse dimensions. This finding has particular resonance in the Indian context, where handcrafted garments often carry family memory and cultural associations, as India champions heirloom clothing that machine-made counterparts cannot replicate. Thorpe (2022) and Williams (2023) argue that pedagogical approaches that support slowness, material engagement, and personal investment in making encourage more ethical relationships between students and the fashion ecosystem. These contributions provide the immediate pedagogical context for the argument developed here.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on semi-structured interviews and reflective observation. Qualitative methodology is appropriate because the research questions concern meaning, experience, and practice: how practitioners understand what they do and what that understanding reveals about craft as a relational and ethical phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The study is not designed to be statistically representative. Its aim is interpretive and transferable, producing accounts rich enough in detail that readers can assess their relevance to comparable contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researcher's sustained involvement in craft pedagogy at NIFT enables a depth of contextual understanding that outsider research would struggle to achieve, which is also acknowledged as a source of potential bias.

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## Participant Selection

Three participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2002)—a strategy used to generate in-depth insight into a specific phenomenon rather than to represent a population. Three criteria guided selection: sustained engagement with craft and fashion practice spanning more than a decade; occupation of distinct positions within the craft-fashion ecosystem; and direct involvement with Indian textile traditions or contemporary slow fashion.

Swarup Dutta is a NIFT alumnus and a practising craft-based designer whose work draws on material exploration and intuitive processes, focusing on bamboo, cane, and folk construction techniques. He has collaborated with bamboo artisans in West Bengal and exhibited at Design Milestone and other design platforms. He was selected because his practice raises explicit questions about ethics, visibility, and whose labour is acknowledged.

Sunetra Lahiri is a NIFT alumna and embroidery artist whose work centres on hand embroidery as a meditative and reflective process, drawing on Nakshi Kantha and Ari work. Her series Hiraeth—developed during a period when travel was impossible—translates personal and literary recollection into sustained surface work. She was selected because her practice exemplifies the relationship between slowness, repetition, and interior engagement that this study seeks to examine.

Piu Sarkar is a NIFT alumna and faculty member at NIFT, Kolkata, whose dual position as educator and long-term consumer of handcrafted clothing allows her to examine craft as both a cultural practice and a pedagogical resource. She was selected because her perspective bridges individual experience and institutional context.

The sample of three is a limitation. This type of qualitative research seeks depth and transferability rather than generality (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Future research should broaden the participant pool to include artisan practitioners, students, and practitioners from other regional craft traditions.

## Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant in Kolkata in 2025. Interview guides remained open, allowing participants to direct the conversation. Core areas of enquiry included experiences of making and wearing craft; the meanings attributed to material engagement; and reflections on care, time, and responsibility. The argument rests on three bodies of scholarship. Sennett (2008) understands craft as a commitment that demands care where repetition builds judgement rather than boredom, and attention to material becomes a form of self-knowledge. Ingold (2013) proposes that making is not the execution of a prior design but an ongoing conversation between the maker and the material. Ghosh (2020), writing specifically about Kantha embroidery in colonial Bengal, shows that women's needlework was never simply domestic labour; it was an assertion of memory, identity, and voice.

Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for member checking—enabling them to clarify or correct the researcher's interpretations.

The study also draws on reflective field observations made during expressive craft workshops facilitated by Danish artist Peter Bjorn Franceschi—specifically, doll-making workshops at Calcutta Pavlov Hospital, Kolkata, and an installation project conducted with prison inmates in Copenhagen in 2017. Franceschi, who spent a significant period as a resident at Kala Bhavan, Shantiniketan, has a sustained engagement with Indian craft contexts that informs the character of these workshops. Field notes were written during and immediately following these sessions and are treated as a distinct but complementary data source.

## Analytical Procedure

Data analysis followed the six-phase process of reflexive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019): familiarisation through repeated reading; generation of initial codes; development of candidate themes; review and refinement; definition and naming; and production of the written analysis. Themes are treated not as pre-given categories but as interpretive constructs developed by the researcher. Four themes emerged: craft as

negotiation of the self; slowness, repetition, and embodied reflection; craft as everyday agency; and craft as relational care, identified across both interview transcripts and observational field notes.

## Reflexivity

As a practitioner, educator, and researcher at NIFT Kolkata with sustained engagement in craft pedagogy, the researcher occupies an insider position that both enriches and constrains the analysis. Insider knowledge provides access to contextual understanding that would not be visible to an outside observer, but it also creates the risk of confirming rather than interrogating existing assumptions. This risk was managed through member checking, reflexive journaling throughout the research process, and deliberate attention to moments of tension or contradiction in the data rather than only those that confirm existing expectations.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Craft as Negotiation of the Self: Swarup Dutta

When Dutta talks about his practice, he does not use the language of heritage or skill transfer. He describes craft as a language—one that comes from within rather than from a received vocabulary of forms. For him, making is intuitive—not in the sense of being undisciplined, but in the sense of being responsive to material, to process, and to an interior logic that resists reduction to formal rules. This is consistent with what Ingold (2013) describes as making through material engagement, a process in which knowledge emerges through sustained contact rather than being applied to matter from outside.

He argues that the ethical dimension of making stems from the context in which it is embedded—the socio-economic relationships it sustains, the curatorial decisions that frame it, and the degree to which it recognises the labour of those who make it. This directly challenges the celebratory narrative of craft, as Adamson (2013) describes, which assumes that handmade is good and visibility is empowerment. His work with bamboo artisans in West Bengal, craftspeople who are seasonally displaced after Durga Puja, makes this argument clear. The collaboration is specific and aims to make visible the labour that mainstream design culture tends to absorb, consistent with Sennett's (2008) description of craft as an ethical commitment not only to the object but also to the relationships from which it arises. His exhibition *Kaw*, named for the first letter of the Bengali alphabet, used bamboo structures to investigate how human aspirations are shaped and constrained by external forces. Craft here is a mode of thinking through material, making an argument that words alone cannot carry.

### Slowness, Repetition, and Embodied Reflection: Sunetra Lahiri

Sunetra Lahiri's practice is built on time. A single embroidered piece may take months; some take more than a year. This is not inefficiency—it is the method. The act of stitching—the rhythm, the silence, the incremental accumulation of surfaces—is where meaning is produced. Lahiri describes this process as a form of sustained attention that allows for mental clarity and interior focus. Sennett (2008) would call it the cultivation of judgement through repetition. What Lahiri adds is that slowness is also a commitment—a form of responsibility toward the material and the traditions she draws on.

Her series *Hiraeth* was developed during a period when travel was impossible, drawing on literary narratives and personal memory—translating interior experience into embroidered surface through density, restraint, and careful modulation. The works carry Chapman's (2005) emotional durability directly: they accumulate meaning over time, both in the making and in living with them. Indian textile traditions—particularly *Nakshi Kantha* and *Ari* work—provide her visual vocabulary, but not as fixed templates. She fragments them, layers them, reassembling them in ways that are historically informed but not historically bound. Precision matters to her: care extends to finish, geometry, and presentation. The assumption that handcraft is synonymous with informality is one she quietly dismantles. Her practice exemplifies what Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) describes as the effortful cultivation of care—neither nostalgic nor sentimental, but deeply committed.

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## Craft as Everyday Agency: Piu Sarkar

Piu Sarkar's perspective shifts the analysis from making to wearing. As both a fashion educator and a long-term consumer of handcrafted clothing, she brings into view what production-centred accounts tend to overlook: what it means to live with craft. The garments she describes are not fashion objects—they are companions. Washed carefully, stored with attention, retained across years and decades. This exemplifies Chapman's (2005) concept of emotional durability, which is enacted not as a design strategy but as an everyday relationship with meaningful objects. Wearing craft is, for Sarkar, a deliberate act—each morning involves a choice that carries cultural and ethical weight. This resonates with Woodward's (2007) analysis of how clothing choices enact identity and social belonging through everyday practice.

She also draws on personal memory to illuminate the cultural significance of craft objects. Kanthas made by grandmothers for newborns in Bengali families are not simply quilts—they carry blessing, labour, memory, and continuity. Ghosh (2020) documents this precisely: the Kantha is a domestic practice in which the act of making and the object made are inseparable from the social world they inhabit. Sarkar's accounts bring this into the present tense—into the everyday decisions of a woman who teaches craft, wears craft, and understands both as forms of ethical practice.

### Indian Craft Traditions: Identity, Care, and Contradiction

Jamdani weaving is demanding work. The extra-weft technique through which motifs are produced requires intense concentration; a single saree may take weeks or months. Over years of practice, weavers develop an intimate knowledge of rhythm, pattern, and material response that constitutes both technical mastery and an embodied ethic of care. But as Kumar (2015) documents, this devotion coexists with significant economic precarity—many Jamdani weavers in West Bengal have been pushed toward faster production methods that erode the very skill that gives the tradition its value. The tacit knowledge embedded in the extra-weft technique cannot be recovered once it is lost; it lives in the hands, not in documentation. Care and exploitation are not opposites here. They coexist.

Kantha embroidery carries similar contradictions. It began, as Ghosh (2020) shows, as a domestic practice of repair—worn textiles stitched into quilts carrying personal memory and community life. It has since become a global commodity marketed through design institutions, NGOs, and fashion weeks. Palit (2023) documents this transformation in detail, showing how NIFT's own interventions have simultaneously preserved and reshaped the craft's visual grammar and social meanings. This is not a simple story of rescue or corruption. It is a story of ongoing negotiation between authenticity and adaptation—one in which design institutions carry significant power and significant responsibility.

### Expressive Making in Institutional Settings

The workshops facilitated by Peter Bjorn Franceschi at Calcutta Pavlov Hospital and a Copenhagen prison extend the analysis into contexts rarely considered in fashion or craft pedagogy. Both institutions are marked by restriction, surveillance, and the systematic removal of individual agency. In these settings, making becomes something different from production—it is expression. At Calcutta Pavlov Hospital, Franceschi facilitated doll-making workshops in which participants created cloth figures embellished through hand embroidery. The dolls were not therapeutic objects in any clinical sense. They were assertions of subjectivity within a context that routinely denies it. McNiff (2004) makes this distinction carefully: art-making in institutional settings should be understood in terms of its expressive and communicative dimensions, not its therapeutic outcomes.

In Copenhagen, prison inmates created installations from recycled waste materials, which they subsequently exhibited. Each piece made an individual visible, and that matters because both institutions share a tendency to collectivise and anonymise those within them. The tendency is being reversed, albeit briefly and incompletely, but in a genuine manner. These observations confirm that craft's capacity for recognition and reflection is not diminished by institutional constraint. In some respects, it is most visible precisely there.

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## Craft as Relational Care: A Synthesis

Across all four themes, one finding stands out: care in craft does not reside in objects or traditions. It arises through relationships—between maker and material, designer and artisan, wearer and garment, facilitator and participant. This relational account of care is consistent with both Noddings (1984) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), for whom care is always contextual, effortful, and potentially fragile. Romanticising craft as inherently ethical or healing obscures the labour inequalities and conditions of vulnerability that characterise actual practice. Dutta's insistence that ethics emerge from context, Lahiri's commitment to precision as ethical responsibility, Sarkar's quiet everyday assertion of what she values, and Franceschi's refusal to frame expressive making as therapy—these positions resist romanticism while insisting on craft's genuine capacity for relational care. Craft is not a solution to fashion's crises. But it holds, when practised with awareness, a capacity to re-orient makers toward what matters.

## Implications for Fashion Education

The findings point toward a set of changes that fashion institutions—particularly NIFT—might consider in how they approach craft pedagogy. First, craft curricula should be reconceived as reflective and relational practice rather than primarily technical or heritage-oriented instruction. Over two decades of accompanying students on craft documentation fieldwork, it has become clear that understanding craft unfolds through sustained, slow engagement—not through technical demonstrations or template-based projects. Students who spend real time in craft environments begin to notice the rhythm of work, the character of materials, and the everyday decisions that constitute craft knowledge. This aligns with what Williams (2023) and Gauntlett (2018) describe as the value of slow, process-centred pedagogy.

Second, the curriculum should engage with the ethical and political dimensions of craft. Ghosh (2020), Palit (2023), and Kumar (2015) each demonstrate that craft cannot be separated from the social context in which it is produced: gender, caste, economic precarity, and institutional power all shape how craft is made, valued, and transmitted. Design education has an obligation to engage with these realities directly. The work of Patel (2021) and Sharma and Mehta (2022) on decolonising craft pedagogy provides important directions here: students should be asked to consider whose knowledge is being mobilised, whose labour is being acknowledged and what obligations arise from their position as designers working with living craft traditions. Third, institutions should explore the expressive and relational dimensions of craft beyond the design studio. The workshop observations in this study suggest that making supports recognition, reflection, and self-expression in contexts far removed from fashion production. Fashion education need not confine its engagement with craft to market-orientated outcomes—it can ask what craft makes possible for the person who makes it and take that question seriously in how it structures learning. Fourth, recycling and upcycling practices embedded in traditions like Kantha offer a starting point for sustainability education grounded in cultural practice. Students who understand Kantha's origins as a practice of transforming worn textiles into something meaningful are better placed to contemplate sustainability as a relational ethic rather than a design specification.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined craft as a practice of care, self-expression, and ethical engagement within Indian fashion education. Three practitioner accounts and two sets of observational field notes produce a consistent finding: craft's capacity for meaning and care does not inhere in objects or traditions. It arises through the quality of attention, relationship, and responsibility that practitioners bring to their work. Dutta's installation practice, Lahiri's meditative embroidery, Sarkar's everyday wearing of handcraft, and Franceschi's expressive workshops each demonstrate a different dimension of this capacity.

Indian craft traditions, especially Kantha and Jamdani, carry complex layers of identity, memory, and continuity that challenge romanticised heritage narratives while reinforcing authentic cultural values. Ghosh's (2020) research on Kantha as women's material expression provides critical scholarly context, situating craft within extended histories of domestic agency and cultural voice that today's practitioners still inhabit and reinterpret. A curriculum that treats craft as reflective, socially embedded, and ethically informed—rather than as a technical discipline or heritage resource—is better positioned to cultivate designers who understand their responsibilities.

NIFT, with its existing craft cluster interventions and longstanding fieldwork traditions, is well placed to lead this reconceptualisation. What is needed is not more documentation of craft but a deeper willingness to ask what making does to and for the people who practise it. This requires institutional willingness to slow down, sustain material engagement over time, and ask difficult questions about the power relationships within which craft is practised and valued.

The study has clear limitations. Three participants cannot represent the diversity of craft-fashion practice in India, and the observational material raises questions about positionality that a longer paper could address more carefully. Future research should engage artisan practitioners directly, include student voices, and examine craft pedagogy across a wider range of institutions and regional contexts. What this study contributes, within those limits, is a grounded account of craft as purposeful, attentive, and socially responsible making—and an argument that fashion education in India has valid reasons to take that account seriously.

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## APPENDIX: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

### Swarup Dutta

Swarup Dutta is a NIFT alumnus and practising craft-based designer whose work draws on material exploration, intuitive process, and folk construction techniques—particularly bamboo and cane. He has collaborated with bamboo artisans across West Bengal and exhibited at Design Milestone and other contemporary platforms. His practice raises explicit questions about ethics, visibility, and labour in craft—questions that shaped the analytical focus of this study.

### Sunetra Lahiri

Sunetra Lahiri is a NIFT alumna and embroidery artist whose practice centres on hand embroidery as a meditative and reflective process. Her work draws on Nakshi Kantha, Ari work, and literary sources of memory. Her series Hiraeth exemplifies her approach to translating interior experience into sustained surface work over extended periods of time.

### Piu Sarkar

Piu Sarkar is a NIFT alumna and currently a faculty member at NIFT Kolkata. She brings both educator and long-term consumer perspectives to her engagement with handcrafted clothing and design pedagogy. Her dual role—as someone who teaches craft and who has worn and cared for handcrafted garments for decades—makes her accounts particularly rich for examining craft as everyday practice.