

# A Way Forward to the Global Market with Indigenous Values and Sustainability: A Case from Sri Lankan Indigenous Apparel Sector

Indigenous  
Values

Received 4 October 2023

Revised 5 October 2023

Accepted 11 January 2024

Published (Online) 29 February 2024

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## Abstract

While sustainability has become an indispensable concern around the world, the modern society is progressively embracing the artisan values and craft values that are coupled with indigenous knowledge and ideals. On such backdrop, an age-old indigenous apparel sector in Sri Lanka, which is known as handloom, is also having a collection of precious values to offer to the world. In that setting, the aim of this study is to explore how Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector can open global doors using their sustainable business practices inspired through indigenous values considering a holistic single case. Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative inquiry with an in-depth interview technique to explore the business values, practices, strategies and the vision of one and only Fair-trade certified handloom manufacturing organization in Sri Lanka. Data gathered through the semi-structured interview conducted with the owner of the selected case organization were analyzed using the thematic analysis method, in favour of the theoretical lens used in the study i.e., Institutional Theory. Thus, the study unfolds that internationally successful company uses its indigenous knowledge and traditional practices creatively and innovatively not being limited to the existing normative and cognitive cultural boundaries. Yet, the regulative pillar should be stronger as there are unethical conducts behind the veil of their success reflecting green-washing attempts. Thus, this study fills existing gaps in the literature due to lack of studies done in Sri Lankan handloom sector addressing its international accessibility. Further, it contributes to uplift the national economy, local entrepreneurship, wellbeing of the industry and empowerment of rural people engaged with the industry.

**Keywords:** Sustainability; Indigenous values; Apparel, Global market; Sri Lanka.

SLJMS



Sri Lanka Journal of Management  
Studies

Vol. 5 – Issue II, 2023

pp, 60 – 80

ISSN (Online): 2792-1093

<https://doi.org/10.4038/sljms.v5i2.116>

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## Introduction

As Mahatma Gandhi once said, there is an adequacy in the world for man's need but not for his greed. This is something that opens up a critical path to view existing business practices in the contemporary organisational arena which promotes consumerism as the way of life despite the increasing resource depletion and environmental destruction. This has paved the way for numerous discussions and debates around sustainability, questioning whether sustainability can really be achieved through business practices or is it merely a management buzzword. As Zorn and Collins (2007) argue, there is a question whether sustainability should be looked at as something to do for businesses or whether it should have a sincere effort with a moral consciousness.

As Zorn and Collins (2007, p. 407) mentioned, "most sustainability literature references the 1987 Brundtland report and it gives most commonly accepted definition of sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Yet, there are numerous factors contributing to unsustainability such as population pressures, poverty and inequality, excessive urbanization and industrial expansion, rise of market-led policies, and global expansion of market forces (Carley & Christie, 2000; Fowler, 2000; Pearce & Barbier, 2000). Accordingly, production and consumption process has become 'the' main problem posing threats to sustainability and hence, Pearce and Barbier (2000) emphasize the importance of integrating a market value to the environment so that cost and benefits of environmental degradation and sustainability will gain greater attention by the corporate sector.

On such a backdrop, while a debate on sustainability is ongoing around the world, discussions on traditions, traditional values, and traditional production methods have also gained attraction as there are evidence that there is a solid an intimate relationship between indigenous people, their values and the natural environment. According to Grenier (1998), indigenous knowledge plays a critical role in ensuring the survival of people who possess such knowledge and conservation of natural environment. As Gratani, et al. (2016) articulate the knowledge they have gathered through their study on how indigenous values preserve the natural world. They claim the fact that indigenous cultures provide more eco-centric models since they consider environmental values as integral part of their human values. Such indigenous cultures are highly recognized in the world forums on sustainability such as World Sustainability Forum, World Economic Forum etc. They measure the quality of life through the harmony with environment acknowledging the dependence of human lives on environment and promote reverence towards environment instead of materialistic possessions and commodification (Gratani, et al., 2016; Bélanger, 2019). Magni (2016, p.6) also states that "in recent years, the increasing awareness of the sustainable way of living of indigenous populations" can be seen with environmental deterioration. Such indigenous values stand against the Western notion of development which is more materialistic. Thus, it is important to recognize indigenous people and their knowledge in fighting against the climate changes and sustainable development challenges (Magni, 2016; Allen & Craig, 2016).

When evaluating the aforementioned sustainability concerns and indigenous values, there is one prominent industry which we can discuss about. That is the apparel sector. The apparel sector is one of the major industries which is highly being accused of harming the environment throughout its entire supply chain (Ozek, 2017), labour related scandals (Fletcher, 2008), promoting unnecessary consumption through fast fashion (Klep, 2015) etc. Thus, scholars are continuously raising the importance of following sustainable practices in the apparel industry to ensure globally successful survival.

In that milieu, when evaluating the Sri Lankan apparel sector, apart from the export-oriented mass scale apparel sector, which possesses a significant portion of national economy and export income of the country, there is another arm of Sri Lankan apparels i.e., its indigenous apparel sector, which is also identified as the 'handloom sector'. In the attempt of evaluating the Sri Lankan apparel sector, the country's indigenous apparel manufacturing sector is almost left behind without paying significant attention on their business practices addressing sustainability, their survival and global accessibility. As Wanniarachchi, Dissanayake and Downs (2018) stated, empowering traditional craft communities in Sri Lankan handloom sector and directing them with the mainstream market is vital to address sustainable development of the country since it directly contributes to the poverty alleviation, job creation, uplifting livelihood of rural community and country's economy. As this study clearly highlights "handloom communities have products that are in demand around the world to sell" (Wanniarachchi, Dissanayake & Downs, 2018, p.08). Further, Dissanayake, Perera, Wanniarachchi (2017) also clearly demonstrate how Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector can achieve sustainability within the fashion industry through its traditional craft practices. Also, Wanniarachchi, Dissanayake and Downs (2020) have stressed the factor that Sri Lankan handloom industry is getting more attraction since the concern on exploitation in production process of world-renowned brands, high quality material, handmade goods and creative industries, fair-trade industries ensuring sustainability is increasing around the world. Further, Senanayake and Hettiarachchi (2020) also mentioned that fast growing fashion consumption is posing threats to environmental preservation and due to such fast fashion trends age-old crafts pass through generations are declining rapidly.

Moreover, this is an industry with deep rooted traditional and historical values and yet, catering to a very limited scope in the market requirement (Department of Textile Industry, n.d.). Even though the industry has been deep rooted in traditional and historical values, there are only eight (08) exporters in Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector. Out of them, only one industry player has obtained International Fair-trade certificate which opens up global windows for the industry to reach global access and success (Sri Lanka Export Development Board, n.d.a). Further, according to the Export Performance Indicators 2022 report published by the EDB, 40% contribution to the Sri Lankan export sector is done by the apparel sector and woven fabric production has a contribution of just 3% according to the statistics (Export Development Board, 2023).

According to the Economic and Social Statistics of Sri Lanka 2020 report published by CBSL, export income of Sri Lankan handloom sector stands only at US \$ (Mn.) 1.16 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020). What should be noted here is the lack of data availability in relation to this indigenous apparel sector. It is clear evidence to stress that the industry has gone unnoticed

for a longer period of time and there is no official data base to identify the sector performance even. As Export Development Board (2017) stated, there are around 962 small scale cottage-based manufacturers, providing employment opportunities for around 15 000 persons, especially for rural women, and there are only eight exporters in the country among whom there is only one International Fair-trade certification holder. As Export Development Board (2017) highlights, the Fair-trade Certification has been identified as one of the tools for the sustainable economic development of the world and an alternative approach for conventional international trade and therefore, now EDB is in the process of introducing this Fair-trade Certification to local industries. Based on these evidence, performance gap of this sector can clearly be depicted stating that the Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector has not reached its full potential in terms of global market access and success apart from very few exporters and a single Fair-trade certificate holder.

Apart from this performance gap, there is a significant literature gap with regards to this area of study where the apparently available number of studies on Sri Lanakan handloom sector is handful. Among them also, no attention has been paid to their international accessibility evaluating their sustainable and indigenous values. Most of the studies out of the available few studies done in this area have considered textile engineering aspects rather than business management aspects. Those studies are elaborated in the literature review section and dearth of studies in this area paves the way for this research to fill that literature gap.

On this backdrop, this paper aims to identify how the only fair-trade certified handloom manufacturer in Sri Lanka has reached the global access and performing well in the international market with its sustainable values inspired through indigenous values. Thus, through the case study approach, this study unveils the different business models, strategies and practices deployed by this extreme case organisation than the other majority of local handloom manufacturers to make a unique please in the global market utilizing sustainable values and indigenous values competitively.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Sustainability and Sustainability Debate***

A continuously chanting topic that we hear in the current world is sustainability. Let it be the academic arena, research world, business world, political rally or conversation; this single word plays a smart role making a platform to discuss many aspects. According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987, p. 43), sustainability is defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

In the Eastern value systems, especially, coupled with religious guidance, depict an expanded pathway to unfold the hands of sustainability to embrace the entire world including, not only mankind, but also the natural environment with all other creatures of the Mother Nature. Karaneeya Meththa Suththa in Buddhist philosophy, Bhagavat Geetha under Hinduism, Book of Genesis 1:27-28 in Christianity, Quran are having such exemplary teachings stating the importance of living simply, while protecting nature, mankind and all other living beings.

Different scholars and practitioners in different fields have paid attention to evaluate whether sustainability is a reality or rhetoric. They question the practices such as carbon trade, which seems to be sustainability oriented in the face, but which are criticized as mere political agendas to continue harmful capitalistic production processes. Thus, they oppose to abusing the nature since it is not belong to any one and the contradiction in the provisioning system of modern society where it is believed that more is good and search for material standard of living (Hahnel, 2012; Varey, 2010). Thus, responsibility for a sustainable society lies with everyone including governments, business organisations, and general public who act as consumers. Yet, it is questionable whether these sustainable practices, per se, are mere fancy jargons to whitewash ongoing unsustainable consumption patterns and production processes promoted by capitalists (Banerjee, 2003).

Lenssen and Smith (2019), introducing a six-step model in achieving sustainable business practices, emphasize that context issues should be embedded to the business models and their competitive strategies in order to achieve sustainable business while ensuring a long term profitable growth. As Porter and Kramer (2011) stresses, businesses should identify not only the economic needs but also the societal needs to cater and they should redistribute the value created by the firm rather than merely expanding the firm value i.e. profits for the business. Consequently, it can be seen that there is a huge responsibility lies with business organisations to ensure the sustainability, especially with the increasing allegation towards profit-oriented business practices, since they are held guilty stating that the businesses are the main cause for environmental degradation and social unbalance. Accordingly, there are many industries which are taken into consideration in the sustainability debate. Among them one of the leading sector is the apparel sector due to its various effects on environment and society.

### ***Sustainability and Apparel Sector***

The apparel sector is one of the major industries in the global trading in terms of trading values, market representation and employment generation. Even though the Covid-19 pandemic has hit hard the industry, still it remains as one of the top global industries. As Shahbandeh (2021) mentions, “the global apparel market is projected to grow in value from 1.5 trillion U.S. dollars in 2020 to about 2.25 trillion dollars by 2025” and according to Russon (2020), “the global fashion industry is worth £2tn (\$1.5tn) and it brings the UK more than £30bn a year in revenues whereas Chinese consumers make up 80% of growth in the market”.

It is identified that the textile industry continuously harms the environment and human society in various ways such as high-water consumption, presence of various pollutants in the wastewater, consuming large amount of energy, chemicals usage, labour-related scandals etc. (Gönlügür, 2019; Fletcher, 2008). Yet some other scholars have claimed that even though the apparel industry is highly accused of being the problem creator, still there is a way for them to drive sustainable businesses through different models and concepts addressing all three pillars in sustainable development (Paraschiv et al., 2015; Shen, Li, Dong, & Perry, 2017; Gam, Cao, Farr, & Heine, 2008).

When the Sri Lankan context is considered, apparel industry is the most significant and dynamic contributor to Sri Lanka's economy while evolving beyond traditional exports and

addressing sustainability through initiatives such as world's first "green garment factory", "garment without guilt" through fair wages, discouraging sweatshops & child labour, and ensuring high quality & reliability of products & production process (Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB), n.d.b.; EDB, 2017a). Loker (2010) also points out Sri Lankan apparel sector has taken progression initiatives such as rural poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, education, environmental initiatives, and better quality of life. And interestingly, she has identified socially responsible employment practices as inherent nature of the country and not something merely followed to comply with codes of the industry. In that discussion sustainability has been identified as a continuous improvement and successful socially responsible practices. Further, it states that those practices are already in place in Sri Lankan culture. Yet, same as the global context, there are questionable incidents in the Sri Lankan apparel industry too (Mills, 2016; Muthukumarana, et al., 2018; Jayawardena, 2010; Kelegama, 2009; Asian Development Bank, 2020).

However, if we consider the Sri Lankan apparel sector as a whole, there is a specific sector in the Sri Lankan apparel industry, which is the indigenous apparel sector which integrates traditional and cultural values of native Sri Lankan society. Klepp (2015) also mentions that locally produced textiles are having a positive vibe in the environmental consciousness due to its usage of natural ingredients, traditions couples with uniqueness and innovations. Yet, surprisingly, Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector has gone unnoticed and left behind without unveiling how it attempts to access the global market with its inherently sustainable production processes and business practices.

### ***Indigenous Values and Sustainability***

As Perry (2012) mentions, national culture is an important underlying factor in determining business practices. Accordingly, she has articulated how Sri Lankan culture inspired with Buddhist philosophy has enhanced its CSR practices while maintaining supplier-buyer relationships ethically. Further, these indigenous values, traditional craft practices are more sought after in the contemporary world since consumers are keen on embracing traditional craft, handmade products, traditional and heritage values in order to appreciate them and to add a different colour to their lives. Further, highlighting the importance of indigenous industries, Gardetti and Muthu (2015, p.01) mention that "craftsmanship breathes humanity into objects, allowing the individual to create for the individual". Accordingly, such industries will be able to develop a strong relationship between consumers and artisans which is highly important for the success of such industries. In addition, Klepp (2015) also, indicates the balance between local production and environmental sustainability. As he highlights, these craft traditions integrated with indigenous/ traditional/ local know-how, indigenous raw material, and value chains of artisan businesses will enhance new market opportunities with an added value. Accordingly, local competences coupled with indigenous raw materials and knowledge will generate a new competitive edge and perspective for the local businesses. Another important aspect of these indigenous industries is the concern given for environmentally friendly production and green practices which include a set of values, cultural traditions, innovations and local character. Such a strong relationship between cultural values and nature will endow indigenous businesses of that culture with a unique pride and a separate landscape.

As Wanniarachchi, Dissanayake and Downs (2018, p.08) highlight, “handloom communities have products that are in demand around the world to sell” and yet, there are lot of barriers they face inside their communities such as lack of entrepreneurial skills, involvement of middlemen, lack of access to raw material and transport facilities, lack of network etc. Still, we should stress the fact that there is a market space for these indigenous products in the global arena. Further, Dissanayake, Perera, and Wanniarachchi (2017, p.01) also clearly demonstrate how Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector can achieve the sustainability within the fashion industry through its traditional craft practices. Further, Dissanayake, Perera, and Wanniarachchi (2017) stress the fact that even though there is an increasing demand for environmentally sustainable products around the world, the attention given for the role played by these craft fashion industries is inadequate and even the researches carried out in that context is very limited.

And also, Wanniarachchi, Dissanayake and Downs (2020) has stressed the factor that Sri Lankan handloom industry is getting more attraction since the concern on sustainability issues in the mass apparel industry in the world is increasing. But the study mentioned that there are lot of structural barriers which hinder innovation and growth of the industry. Further, Recent fair-trade movement has awakened the attention towards these practices in the world. Yet, Wanniarachchi, Dissanayake and Downs (2020, p.126) stress and articulate the factor that “weavers have very limited access to (global) markets and require support to build new networks beyond their community and country” which clearly shows that the international accessibility of Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector is still in very primitive infancy level. As they further argue, consumers prefer to embrace socially and environmental ethical products. Therefore, there is a growing market for hand-made sustainable products coupled with cultural values, local identities and craftsmanship. Yet, Sri Lanka has not reaped the harvest of such growing market place since the international presence of Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector is limited to very few organisations and even among them, there is only one player who had been able to reach fair-trade guarantee.

### ***Indigenous Values, Sustainability and Global Access***

Indigenous values encompass the wisdom, customs, and convictions cultivated by indigenous societies across generations. These values are handed down over time and resonate with principles such as integrity, reliability, truthfulness, and modesty. They signify a dedication to the community and embody a respectful connection with the environment. (Brondizio, et al., 2021).

Based on the different initiatives that has taken in the global arena with regards to the indigenous values, it is evident that the attention and worth given for indigenous people, traditions and values has increased. Accordingly, United Nations (2017) has come up with a separate agenda for 2030 with a major concern extended for the rights and values of indigenous people. Some of the major reasons behind such an importance given for indigenous traditions and people are, as United Nations (n.d.a.) articulated, “indigenous peoples are inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment” and as Dhir (2016) also points out, “indigenous peoples are crucial agents of change for combating climate change and realizing the ambitious vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

Accordingly, it can be identified that indigenous people, their traditions, values and knowledge have been recognized as an important and significant vehicle to achieve the sustainability in a world which has been polluted through the profit seeking capitalist competition. Accordingly, they have identified indigenous people as owners of natural resources and hence their businesses are connected with traditional knowledge and natural resources. Accordingly, such entrepreneurships and business practices have become a part of their life style. Therefore, there are lot more things to be taken from those values rather than merely following sustainability policies and agendas limited to documents and words (Belanger, 2019; Moody, 2020, Daes, 2004). Further, Padmasiri (2018) also, with referring to Sri Lankan context, states that Sri Lanka is also enriched with remarkable pool of indigenous knowledge and skills but unfortunately, they are under-utilized, under-appreciated, and unidentified.

In this backdrop, in order to open the doors of international markets for Sri Lankan indigenous traditional business, EDB has taken steps to introduce Fair-Trade certificate standard to Sri Lankan traditional exporters as it has become a new tool to reach sustainable economic development and works as an alternative mechanism to existing conventional international trade (EDB, n.d.). Accordingly, now customers are more aware of and insisted on buying products with Fair-Trade mark and hence it opens up new international market places for local products while generating high income. These discussions open up critical lenses to look at the Sri Lankan indigenous sectors and their international accessibility. Yet, it is clear that the sustainable values inherent with indigenous businesses are really high and there is a significantly growing international market for such indigenous products embracing sustainable and ethical values (Ayanu & Newman, 2020).

Thus, this study aims to unveil how the one and only fair trade certified handloom company in Sri Lanka has reached the international level successfully and maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage over other competitors from different countries in a context where majority of Sri Lankan handloom manufacturers are limited to their regional market spaces. International accessibility of Sri Lankan handloom industry is not explicitly addressed in current literature and all most all the studies are conducted from textile engineering perspective, not in management aspects. As this concern is not sufficiently addressed in literature, it will contribute to fill that gap. Further, it will be helpful for policy makers and industry players in uplifting Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector to the world.

### ***Theoretical Lenses Used***

While many sustainability theories have been used in quantitative studies, this study has used the Institutional Theory (IT) as its theoretical lens to support the discussion and shaping the structure and the boundary of the study. When the IT is considered, number of different studies can be found which have used this theory with a qualitative perspective and also in the sustainability arena. Accordingly, Powell and Bromley (2015) identify the relationship between social structure and the contemporary organisations by discussing the applicability of the New Institutionalism theory in the analysis of complex contemporary organizations. Accordingly, as they highlight, new institutional theory study how the external environment socially develops organisations, providing them with a guidance to formulate their formal structures and policies,



and thereby increasing an organisation's legitimacy in the wider social world. Further, organisations tend to maintain homogeneity in their formal structures despite internal technical requirements due to the interference of the environment and therefore, organizations may reshape their policies and practices (Zucker, 1987). Further, the discussion depicts that while institutional forces such as regulative, normative, cultural elements shape individual interests and behavior and thereby how organizations work, on the other hand such institutions are also getting reproduced through every day practices of individuals and organizational members. Accordingly, they suggest more interpretive inquiries to identify the relationship between social institutions and business practices in the complex contemporary world of business. Hence we can understand how institutional elements in a country or a cultural context influence the business practices of a particular industry and therefore, this theory will be appropriate to evaluate the business practices of such an industry which enormously inspired by indigenous values and cultural boundaries of the country. This enables to investigate how regulative, normative and cognitive elements affect the global reach of Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector organisations more deeply while evaluating behaviour and beliefs of organisational members, especially with regards to the internationally successful organisation.

## **Methodology**

This study is conducted under the qualitative approach since it focuses on how the one and only fair trade certified handloom manufacturer in Sri Lanka has reached that level utilizing indigenous and sustainable values in their business strategies and practices. Majority of sustainability related studies have been conducted in quantitative approach using more functionalist theories. Yet, through this study, behaviours and practices of globally successful organisation in the Sri Lankan indigenous apparel industry are evaluated. Based on such grounds, case study strategy was deployed in this study where an extreme case was selected based on its international achievement level. As scholars identified, a case is a simple or complex phenomenon of some sort of occurring it can be used to obtain the real picture of a problem in real life context (Punch, 2004; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Thus, this strategy is more appropriate as it was able to explore their own ideas, experiences, perceptions and especially, the complexity of the situations they face in their routine business activities in their own words which unveiled deeper and practical understanding of the industry by utilizing interpretive paradigm. Since the selected organization was investigated holistically, this study is a holistic, single case study.

This extreme case represents the globally successful Sri Lankan indigenous apparel manufacturing organisation. The owner of this organisation was interviewed since owners can represent the organizations which fall under the SME category. Hence, owners are the most suitable and capable sources to share their insights. Owner of this company is a lady who is a lawyer with 04 degrees and high English literacy. Selecting this organisation had no limitations and hesitations since it is the only company which has reached this success in the international market with the Fair-trade certification and hence it stands out among other exporting organisations (08 in number) in the Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector. Hence, as the exemplary extreme case in that arena, above mentioned organisation was selected directly using the purposive sampling method. The interview method was used as the data collection method of this study in order to gather in depth qualitative data. Under the interview method also, semi-

structured interview method is used since it does not restrict or impose rigid boundaries to the data collection whereas researcher is free to probe into responses, ask cross questions, and ask for more clarifications, details, explanations from the respondents. The thematic analysis method was used as the data analysis technique. And, since there was a pre-determined theoretical background for this study, it was also considered when developing codes and themes so that research problem can be answered with the support of those theoretical lenses.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Case Summary*

Internationally successful, only fair-trade certified Sri Lankan handloom company is the selected case in this study. That organization is named Pinnacle Handloom and the lady owner of the organization is named as Irani. She is a lawyer with 04 degrees and has received the business from her mother and has developed it to the international level during her ownership period around 15 years by now. And she is the one who has guided the business towards Fair-trade standards. The Pinnacle Handloom is registered with EDB and exports handloom for more than 20 countries around the world including Europe countries, USA, UK, and Australia. Apart from these regional markets, it caters corporate customers also such as hotels, institutions etc. It is situated in Kurunegala and currently employs around 200 direct employees and 800 extended employees as a scattered network. Majority of the workforce is enriched with traditional weavers with indigenous knowledge whereas there are newly entered manufacturers without such a generational background also. Production process is mainly hand-made whereas some elements have been automated. Thus, the organisation is highly innovative in terms of products, weaving techniques, marketing programmes and so on adapting technology and online platforms including social media under her guidance and vision.

### *Thematic Development*

The following table summarizes the process of developing key themes from the discussion findings of the interview and key excerpts of the interviewee to establish that process. Developing these codes and themes were supported by the selected theoretical framework as well.

**Table 01. Themes and Codes**

| Themes                                  | Codes   | Excerpts   |
|---|---|--|
| Utilizing unique cultural underpinnings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact of the national culture</li> <li>• Indigenous knowledge pertaining to the industry</li> </ul> | <p><i>“I am already close to the nature and that is how we were grown from childhood. So our surrounding inspired through Buddhist cultural values have shaped our minds and we continue them with our business also”.</i></p> <p><i>“What I understand is we still have a huge value for our handloom in the international market. ... We have integrated Sri Lankan culture, values and traditions in our entire process and that is our core. It comes from Buddhism and I think that is integrated in to our business more and more. That way we are always very humble,</i></p> |

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*we keep respect for women in our organisation, we deal with all stakeholders ethically. That is appreciated and wanted by global consumers. ... Absolutely, there are more opportunities available for us if we correctly understand our strengths that lie in our unique cultural values that are stimulated by Buddhism. Simply, we have to change the way we look. But at the core, we have absolutely everything – to grow and conquer the global market.”*

*“My workforce has indigenous knowledge which comes from generation. But the issue is they are just crafting something, but they can’t bring themselves up. ... Our rural mentality and overly embedded national identity of this industry is actually a crippling thing. What we are thinking is, our traditional knowledge can be sold in international market because it has a huge value; yet, in a different angle while protecting our dignity, history and all. So, even the indigenous knowledge should be moulded in innovative ways to create a value.”*

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| Necessity for change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Adapting innovations and new technology</li> <li>● Openness to change, willingness and capacity to face challenges, out of the box thinking of educated industry players</li> </ul> | <p><i>“Our manufacturers are doing something for the sake of doing. So, in handloom, what we are giving is not enough to impress. If we want to go to a premium, you need to be humble enough to say my product is same as others, but I have a story that you cannot buy from anywhere else. So, now the trend of craft industry is not just particular to end product. We have to think more in different ways.”</i></p> <p><i>“Yes, the owner’s education, technological know-how, and language fluency matter to a greater extend in doing business and developing it to the international market”.</i></p> <p><i>“We do continuous research and that’s how we develop innovative products and introduce new concepts. My academic background plays a role there.”</i></p> |
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| Remoulding the institutional setting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Low impact of the regulative setting</li> <li>● High impact of the social normative and cultural cognitive arrangements</li> <li>● Reversal process of reshaping the institutional</li> </ul> | <p><i>“There are no such industry specific things actually when dealing with the global market. But Fair-trade is a separate one... I maintain strict rules policies inside the company to continuously comply with Fair-trade requirements. We have completely dedicated for Fair-trade compliance. In monitoring, reporting everything we have a very strong compliance system.”</i></p> <p><i>“We have different culture related programmes such as welfare program, campaigns, traditions for Awrudu, Vesak, Ramazan, Eid; we do the integration. We make sure that respect for all cultures, any kind of a person whether they are transgender, women, disable etc.”</i></p> <p><i>“We make sure to deliver a social message through our products. We</i></p> |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|

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|-------------------------------|--|--|
|                               | structure by the success story   | <p><i>are planning to launch zero waste collection for environment day; our products like sarees show heritage. We use products and stories in our marketing.”</i></p> <p><i>“Through our ‘Think teams’ concept, we are open to more discussions and suggestions in order to make decisions which are best suitable for the company and its global business. We do not hesitate to change the existing social cultural values and bring in new trends which are beyond the commonly accepted social norms and embedded assumptions of the culture of the country.”</i></p>   |
| Overcoming operational issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Material issue</li> <li>● Labour issue</li> <li>● Time management issue</li> <li>● High quality vs. high price issue</li> </ul> | <p><i>“Of course, it matters and there is a problem. ...Earlier, we also had to depend on others but now with our network and stability, we can buy our own material through our supply chain.”</i></p> <p><i>“When the world is developing, craftsmanship also have to be developed. Then craftsman should be developed. It is must to adapt new technology. We have integrated technology in handloom machines. And also, at least the weavers in rural villages should have access to mobile technology. With that, young generation can also be attracted.”</i></p> <p><i>“With our mutual understanding and trust, we get into an agreement regarding the possible order delivery date with our customers.”</i></p> <p><i>“Indeed, the quality of our products is a key strength in global access. ...Most of our local manufacturers do not maintain the required quality. We can make our story the king with a good quality base product.”</i></p> |

**Source:** Authors presentation

### Discussion of Findings

Accordingly, it is intended to identify the reasons behind the international success of Pinnacle Handloom which is the only Fair-trade certified indigenous apparel company in Sri Lanka. In that discussion, it is intended to uncover how it has utilized their sustainable business practices coupled with indigenous values throughout their journey towards the global access.

#### *Utilizing Unique Cultural Underpinnings*

There is a high influence from the national culture which is inspired mainly through Buddhism on this industry. Being an indigenous sector, those cultural values are inherently embedded. Therefore, their business practices are also aligned and shaped through cultural underpinnings of the mass society. Hence, it highly contributes to the naturally implanted sustainability practices of the business.

IK is the key component of the unique culture of the industry. Hence, it is creating a unique value for this industry which enables to highlight Sri Lankan handloom among other competitive countries. Yet, it is in the risk due to the traditionally confined attitude, beliefs and practices of manufacturers who descend from generations. Yet, it is highly important to make use of this unique indigenous knowledge with creative thinking while preserving its cultural and indigenous values in accessing the international market.

Owner of the success story has well understood and admitted that the national culture and traditional values and the indigenous knowledge of the industry are highly valuable in creating a unique identity for Sri Lankan indigenous apparel. Further, they strengthen the sustainability orientation of the organisation as an underlying cultural value. Hence, cultural values, traditional practices and indigenous knowledge pertaining to this industry are striking factors in competing in the international market. Yet, the success story has identified that merely following traditional practices based on generational indigenous knowledge is not sufficient; rather it has a crippling effect on the international accessibility of the industry. Therefore, keeping such traditional, cultural, generational, and indigenous knowledge, values and practices as the core, Pinnacle Handloom is continuously developing innovations in terms of almost all the aspects of the business such as products, processes and concepts.

As literature also highlight, indigenous industries make products alive by incorporating natural flavors and cultural values (Loker, 2010; Gardetti & Muthu, 2015; Klepp, 2015) and Sri Lankan culture inspired through Buddhism has enhanced ethical business practices (Perry, 2012). Accordingly, the national culture inspired through Buddhism drive the sustainability practices of the industry. Indigenous knowledge pertaining to the industry creates a unique identity for Sri Lankan handloom. With the current sustainability concerns, attention for craft industries, changing life styles and trends, these cultural underpinnings are able to open and enhance the international accessibility for the Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector. The internationally successful company has embraced this indigenous knowledge and is utilizing it creatively and strategically in par with modern consumption cultures coupling innovations and technology.

### ***Necessity for Change***

On the backdrop as explained above, the most contributing factors for its global success are the tendency of embracing change, out of the box thinking, and dare to break the traditional frames.

During that attempt, owner, management team and workers of the company are open to changes, continuously doing innovations and adapting new technology. Further, they also emphasize that there is no harm of adapting technology and innovations since it is possible to use the indigenous knowledge with a new flavor while preserving its unique cultural and indigenous values. Furthermore, they have utilized this approach to solve operational issues of the industry such as lack of labour and reluctance of the young generation to involve in the industry. Accordingly, using new technology and innovative concepts, Pinnacle Handloom has developed new job opportunities rather than traditional weaving and has been able to attract young people to work in their organisation.

Another main factor behind the success of the company, strengthening its philosophy of embracing changes and novelties, is the educational background of the owner. According to the findings, having higher education level and language fluency is a favorable factor in accessing the international market. Furthermore, when the owner is enriched with a higher educational background, such companies are ready to embrace changes expanding traditional frontiers of the industry. And also, the owner of Pinnacle Handloom with a very strong educational background has used her capabilities and background to develop business strategies coupled with international connections, industry related networks, and international standards.

Scholars also prove this factor by stressing that craft producers should bring in new products time to time and continuously improve existing products and there is a positive link between the level of education and business growth of SMEs (Makhitha, 2016). Further, researchers suggest that the whole system should change to change these attitude issues and take indigenous traditional industries to new highs (Silva, 2019). Though the traditional indigenous knowledge and practices create a unique identity and potential for international accessibility, merely following years old practices are not practical to cater the contemporary market needs. Success story owner and other local handloom company owners with higher educational qualifications have understood this factor. Therefore, they try to embrace changes, innovations, new technology and try to be self reliant in their journey towards success. Success story owner has highly emphasized these factors as reasons behind her success story.

### ***Remoulding the Institutional Setting***

Another factor which has determined the international success of Pinnacle Handloom is the ability to reshape institutional elements such as social normative and cultural cognitive values and believes. Accordingly, the success story has absorbed the key cultural and traditional values of the nation and the industry as the core of the business and yet, it evolves them in par with new lifestyles and trends in the world through their products, practices, concepts, marketing and so on. To further elaborate this factor with an instance, it was identified that the factors such as environmental concern, ethical relationship with workers, nature of the family ownership and leadership qualities of Sri Lankan indigenous apparel companies are bestowed from the cultural underpinnings of the local society which is inspired through Buddhism. Yet, the success story owner maintains and follows the same values while taking initiatives to remodel societal values such as celebrating diversity including LGBTQI community. Accordingly, it creates a new vibe in the local context, attracting young generation and attention of the international community. It obviously paves the way for them to expand their international pervasion. Until other local manufacturers keep themselves confined within the old traditional boundaries and deep rooted believes unnecessarily, they are not able to do real value addition through out of the box thinking. Hence, they are unable to reap real returns in terms of international accessibility as same as the success stories of the industry such as Pinnacle Handloom. Finally, it was evident that keeping a healthy balance between reshaping the institutional settings and preserving core values is essential in reaching the international access and responsible regulatory bodies should be more awaken in this regard to yield the optimum result.

Confirming these findings, literature states that formal organisational structures are affected by the institutional rules of the state and the society. In addition, there will be a similarity between organisations operating in a particular industry since they make their work processes, rules, policies, value systems etc. in line with the social norms and assumptions. Further, institutions are also getting reproduced through every day practices of individuals and organizational members as a result of their attempts to find solutions for everyday problems (Lang, 2018; Palthe, 2014; Scott, 2013).

In summary, regulative impact of the industry is low where as both social normative and cultural cognitive settings play dominant roles. Being a traditional, indigenous industry, organisational members naturally embrace mass cultural values, believes, and practices inside organisations. Therefore, homogeneous organizational values and practices can be seen in the industry. But the success story has taken a different path by trying to bring new ideas, values, believes to the national cultural and thereby, reshape the social normative and cultural cognitive arrangements of the industry.

### ***Overcoming Operational Issues***

Further, Pinnacle Handloom has been able to successfully face operational issues of the industry such as issues in lack of material needed, time management issue, maintaining high quality at a premium price for their products.

There are few operational barriers with this industry. Inability to get material at a reasonable price due to high import tax and dominance by few importing companies is a major issue. Further, responsible government organisations are criticized for not taking actions either to grow yarn here in Sri Lanka or researching for alternative materials. Due to the pitiable social identity created for this type of industries, there is a considerable issue in finding new blood to carry out the industry. Further, local manufacturers try to differentiate the quality of products to compete and match with low prices of imported low quality products. It is done with the idea of assuring the survival of their livelihood by trying somehow to earn something. It also holds back the ability of local manufacturers to reach international access. Finally, the production process naturally consumes a lot of time due to its nature and it should be strategically tackled by negotiating with the buyers if the manufacturers want to reach the success in international arena. Further, they are self-reliant seeking more avenues to reach the global access rather than depending on regulatory institutional support. This is also a key factor determining the success in reaching the international market by this type of indigenous industries.

Literature also proves that there should be mechanisms and strategies to motivate young people to enter into these industries and endow their skills, capabilities and technologically updated knowledge to uplift those industries and it is important to motivate traditional craft industries to improve competitiveness in terms of quality, cost and prices (Yeh & Lin, 2011; Bouziane & Hassan, 2016; Makhitha, 2016). When considering all these literatures, they confirm the findings of the study in relation to operational concerns. Even though every handloom company faces these issues, it was further evident that the success story is able to solve them using their corporate power, network and connections, communication skills, and strategic planning.

## Conclusion

This study unveils how the one and only fair-trade certified handloom company in Sri Lanka has reached the global access and success by changing the existing traditional barriers and bringing innovations and technology to the field. The educational background of the owner plays a role there since the education paves the way for her to embrace novelties in the world, take challenges and being self-reliant in seeking international opportunities.

This study makes a significant involvement in terms of theoretical contribution, empirical contribution, managerial implications, economic and societal contribution through its findings since the handloom industry in Sri Lanka caters different socio-economic issues in the country while preserving unique cultural values. Limitations of the study include the channel of data collection which was telephone conversations due to the travelling restrictions imposed during the pandemic period. Hence the ability to obtain information through observations was missed out. Further, the thematic analysis was done using the narration of one case and it can be further improved by incorporating multiple case studies.

This study only pays attention to the international accessibility of Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector while exploring its sustainable and indigenous practices. During the study, it was noted that some unethical power and politics related behaviors are done by globally successful organizations. But it was not deeply investigated since it is out of the scope of the study. Thus, it is advisable to carry out a separate study regarding hidden dark behaviors of this kind of indigenous organisations which are covered by apparent cultural, traditional, and indigenous values.

With all these findings, this study has various theoretical, empirical, managerial and societal implications contributing to revive the national economy, socio-cultural elements, industry standards, unique indigenous values of the industry, and living standards of the wider society including the industry players. Since there are several untouched areas of this industry which will endow interesting findings, it is open for future researches to navigate through the Sri Lankan indigenous apparel sector contributing to the betterment of different facets of the industry, academic arena and the wider society.

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