

## **A REFLECTION OF INDIGENOUS CRAFTS THROUGH PERFORMANCE WEAR**

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### **Abstract**

Performance wear is the broad category of clothing that fulfils the requirement of providing ease of performing a specified function for the wearer. It comprises of protective clothing, workwear, uniforms, active wear, protective wear for healthcare workers, vanity clothing, athleisure, and so on. One such performance wear category is uniforms for school. The use of school uniforms shows a significant improvement in performance of students (Huss, 2007). School uniforms tend to create a sense of belonging, a community identity while ensuring children from different backgrounds come together to be viewed on a uniform scale. Another important aspect of community identity creation is the local culture, crafts and dress. The authors propose to create one such collaborative clothing, which uses indigenous crafts for creating school uniforms. The attempt is to reimagine the crafts as performance wear while providing the comfort that the local indigenous crafts have as an inherent characteristic.

The research tools for this qualitative research are interviews, ethnographic research and observation to do needs assessments and to scope the collaboration of school uniforms and indigenous crafts. An interview schedule was developed for the users, academicians and uniform manufacturers and vendors to do needs assessments (n=200 students, n=50 academics, n=20 uniform manufacturers/vendors). Various trends in the market along with fashion forecasting were studied while creating design solutions. Prototypes were developed based on the research and were evaluated for the parameters of aesthetics, functionality and comfort on a Likert scale. Textile testing and quality checks were conducted as per the Indian Standard (IS) norms.

The observations led the authors to create a stronger framework for quality to provide the means of diversifying the sources of cloth in the market segment for uniforms. The authors have made an attempt to create better business opportunities for local artisan communities by giving design solutions for school uniforms.

## **Introduction**

When human hands and heart work in tandem that is grace in making. Handwoven cloth has beauty and grace that is significant- Sadhguru (Isha Foundation, n.d.)

The COVID-19 pandemic affected each and every economy. It was observed that the pathway from the impact of the pandemic to recovery for any national economy lies in the local employment and development (Ahrend, 2020). School uniforms is one such opportunity to provide this economic boost to the crafts as well as the national economy. Looking at the lucrative growth of the school uniform market and the presence of Indian crafts, this attempt of collaborative design can be seen as a social turn to redefine a sense of collectivity and participation of craft practices (Zellmer, 2017).

Clothing originated as one of the basic necessities of human kind with the primarily purpose to protect against extreme weather and subsequently for modesty. Over the thousands of years of existence of mankind, clothing and its narratives have evolved. One such present day narrative of clothing that is gaining attention is performance clothing.

Performance clothing or performance wear can be defined as a broader umbrella of clothing that is designed for a special purpose to perform a specific function. It comprises of garments ranging from workwear/ uniforms to protective clothing, from athleisure to vanity clothing as well as from active wear to adaptive clothing. The clothing caters to performance needs for differing and demanding environmental conditions. Along with the idea of meeting the performance needs of the wearer, the garments provide an identity (Coats Group PLC, n.d.). Clothing, a necessary part of everyday lives, plays a significant role in how people define and construe themselves.

### ***Uniforms - A Tool For Community Identity***

One of the larger categories of performance clothing is uniforms. A uniform represents a clothing-group of combined garments worn together that are prescribed to all members of a specific group/organisation/institution. Uniforms, in addition to the primary purpose of protection and performance, provide an identity a group of people. It is indicative of membership to a group in a social environment. The role of clothing and fashion as a tool of communication is also clarified by M. Barnard in his book, *Fashion as Communication* (1996). The various aspects of fashion and clothing, in western capitalist societies dress, confirms membership of different social and cultural groups, but also establishes personal identity. Fashion, with various combinations of clothing, allows and encourages individual choice and thus the dissemination and development of personal identity. Uniforms take superiority over the individual's personality. This is the power of communication and representation of a particular enterprise or group. To summarise, it can be said that uniform creates a group in which individuals do not stand out, instead taking on the uniformed image.

Uniforms for school children play a vital role to provide a sense of belongingness, equality and uniformity among the students regardless of the child's religion, caste, economic positioning, and so on. In present times, the children are exposed to varied fashion brands and trends.

Clothes communicate individual identity and a uniform dressing across the students helps break the notion of judging based on what brands are worn. Uniforms create a feeling of oneness and negate the opportunity to bully each other for their background.

Uniforms are effective in time management as the student does not have to spend time planning what has to be worn each day (Sri Sri Academy, 2022). Uniforms contribute to better discipline in everyday school operations. The findings support that in general, implementing school uniforms at schools might enhance discipline and allow for better learning (Baumann and Krskova, 2016). Apart from the sense of belonging and positive impact on academic performance, school uniforms turn out to be an economical alternative (Ingram, 2016). The uniform dress code facilitates identifying trespassers in the school.

### ***Indigenous Craft As A Cultural Identity Tool***

Craft goods are social objects that assume an importance beyond household maintenance and reproduction. They signify and legitimize group membership and social roles, and become reserves of wealth, storing intrinsically valuable materials and the labor invested in their manufacture. Specialized craft producers are actors involved in the creation and maintenance of social networks, wealth, and social legitimacy (Kramer, 2001). It may be observed that similar to uniform that transcends a sense of community identity, craft is a tool that provides a cultural identity to the community. Together, the authors propose to create a stronger sense of identity creation while empowering the artisans with a product diversification in the form of school uniforms.

### ***Sustained Livelihood For Artisans***

The pandemic took the world by surprise, pushing everyone out of their comfort zone as human kind struggled to survive through the pandemic. The handloom and crafts sector faced a major setback as the artisans were not well equipped with digital selling options. It may be observed that for the crafts sector to recover from the impact of pandemic, wider appreciation and dissimilation into newer product avenues by fashion and textile industry is required (Das, 2022). Even the central government of India pushed for recovery through the #vocalforlocal campaign to promote use of indigenous local craft products. A report titled “Reimagining the craft economy post COVID19” by the British Council (2021) also stressed on the fact to foster innovation through new developments in products and strengthening design interventions through creations in sync with global trends.

### ***Crafts For Uniforms For School Children***

The pandemic caused a disruption for the craft economy, however to some extent united many artisans and organisations. It also paved new ways of working to develop market opportunities through collaboration (British Council, 2021). One such need was observed to disseminate craft into a larger economic spectrum of performance clothing. Back in 2002, a militant group in Manipur, India had ordered the school and college going girls to wear the traditionally hand woven - *phanek* as a uniform (Figure1).



Figure 1. Manipuri school girls wearing *phanek* as a uniform

The vendors spoke about the surge and a drastic push to the cottage industry of Manipur, which was one of the largest sources of livelihoods for the locals after agriculture. Later in 2010-2011, another college in Assam, Kokrajhar Government College, proposed a uniform comprising of the traditional *dokhona* (a traditional dress worn by Bodo women) with a *fasra* (a stole) and a blouse (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Students in Kokrajhar Government College in their traditional uniforms

This move also generated a sustained income opportunity for the local weavers. In 2021, the renowned fashion designer from India, Mr. Sabyasachi Mukherjee, in collaboration with a non-profit organisation (CITTA) promoting empowerment of women in remote and marginalised communities in the world, designed and developed a school uniform for the girls in for a school

in Rajasthan using the traditional hand block printing technique of Ajrakh using natural indigo and madder root dyes (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Students of Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls School, Jaisalmer adorning school uniforms made from traditional Ajrakh printing

The initiative garnered a lot of praise worldwide for promoting cultural traditions as part of performance clothing. Apart from these collaborations, some state governments in India are also encouraging government schools to use Khadi fabric as part of school uniform.

### **Objective of the study**

The paper aims to provide sustained livelihood opportunity for the local artisans of indigenous crafts by developing school uniforms. The following objectives of the study are laid out below:

- a. To develop a conceptual framework for designing school uniforms using indigenous crafts.
- b. To explore experiences of all the stakeholders in school uniforms - students, teachers, uniform manufacturers for need assessment.
- c. To identify the indigenous crafts that can be used for developing uniforms.
- d. To evaluate the design and the textiles used for performance analysis.

### **Research Methodology**

Qualitative research was conducted through developing an interview schedule for the users of school uniforms, academicians, uniform manufacturers and vendors for need assessment. The responses from a total of 270 respondents that comprised of 200 students, 50 academicians and 20 uniform manufacturers and vendors were analysed. The selection of the respondents was done through convenient sampling method. Through observation study, ethnographic research was conducted to study the cultural patterns and perspectives of participants in their natural setting and their reaction to the proposed school uniform designs.

For a better understanding of the durability and practicality of the school uniform developed, the handloom textiles were sent for textile testing.

## Results and Discussion

### *Developing a Conceptual Framework for Designing Uniform*

Designing uniforms for school children is a vast topic and a complicated task that depends on various functional needs. By bringing in a conceptual design thinking process, it lays a strong foundation in designing and developing uniforms for school children. The final product not only needs to meet the functional needs of the user but also create a sense of acceptance through a balance of aesthetics. If the aesthetic needs of a user are not met with, the success of design is greatly hampered. Based on an in-depth review of literature, a conceptual framework was used for design development of the school uniform (Figure 4). Figure 4 describes the conceptual framework developed for design development of uniforms for school children of secondary section using the identified textiles from the Western India.

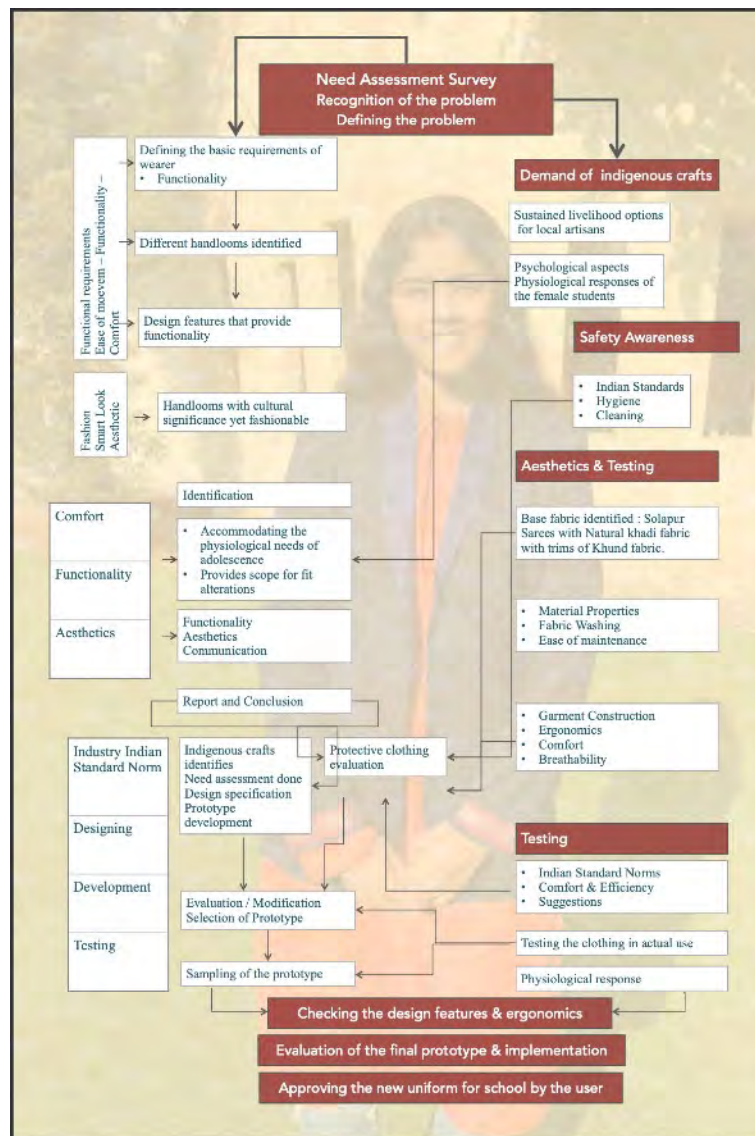


Figure 4. Conceptual Framework for design development of uniform for school children

### *Needs Assessment Survey*

Through convenient sampling method, 200 female students of secondary section of schools in Western India were selected for an interview schedule. The needs of the students were analysed to understand the preferences of material, color, trends, garment details and design features. Out of the 200 female students who participated in the interview schedule, the majority of the students were 14-15 years old (Chart 1).

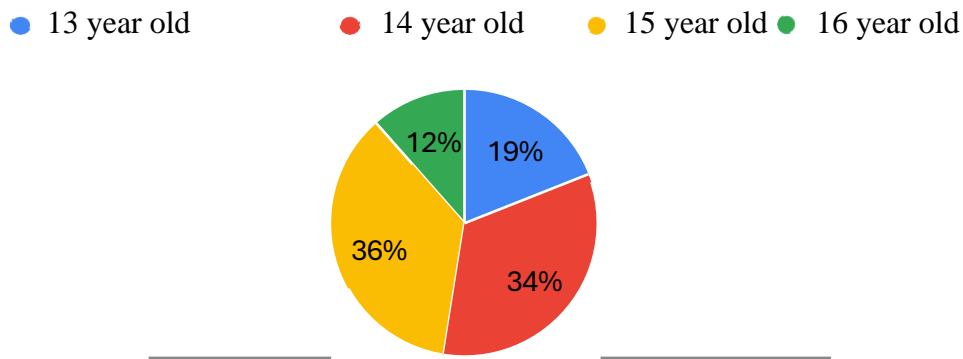


Chart 1. Age distribution of the participants

As the target audience belongs to the adolescence age, the results showed an increased focus on the style preferences and design over quality. Chart 2 shows the comparative grading for the features in the uniform design as assessed by the participants.



Chart 2. Feature preferences for uniform design

The participants were asked for their colour preferences for the uniform. During the observatory study and interview schedule, the authors noted that the participants of the interview schedule strongly felt the need to have a uniform that is beyond the conventional colour sets of white, greys and blues. They felt that a brighter colour palette was more exciting than the conventional mundane colour schemes. Chart 3 shows the color preferences, where

the deep colours that are associated with Indian colour palette (Figure 5) were the preferred choices.

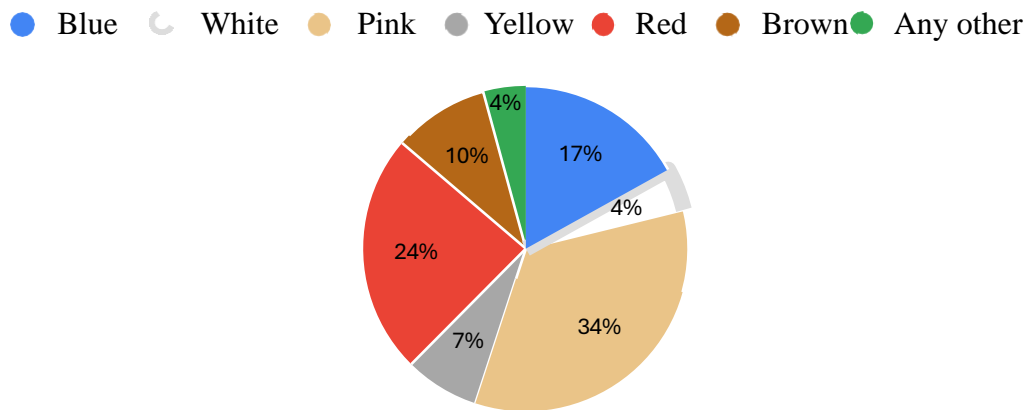


Chart 3. Color preferences for uniform design



Figure 5. Indian colour palette

The participants were asked their expectations and requirements of a uniform. It is quite interesting how the GenZ (born between late 1990s and early 2010s) have a clarity of their requirements and expectations. As one of the participants mentioned, they want clothing that accommodates the changes in their body that adolescence age is bringing. The participants are of an age where they all are wanting to look stylish and are trying to develop positive associations with their own body. Hence, having a design that has scope of adjustments and style lines that cater to all body types would be crucial for better acceptance of the proposed design. The students were also asked their preferred type of uniform. Since quite a few of the students use bicycles as mode of commute to the school, they preferred a two piece uniform design with a bifurcated lower garment. Chart 4 describes their garment preferences for the uniform. Through the discussions it was also suggested to have a blazer for the winter season as against a cardigan or a sweater as it provides a stylish look.



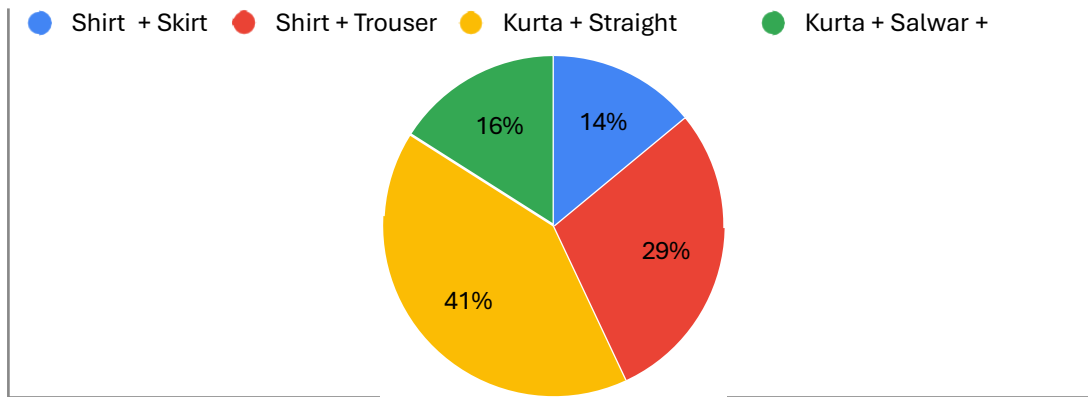


Chart 4. Clothing preferences for uniform design

Apart from the users, female students (12-16 years old), the authors also interviewed the academicians of the institute to understand their expectations from the uniform. The overall consensus between the academicians was to have a uniform that helps establish a connection with the roots for GenZ while keeping the uniform easy to manage through the day. “The uniform should provide a sense of belongingness to their culture while not being a distraction to manage the uniform through the day”, as one of the participants mentioned.

The interview schedule with the uniform manufacturers provided the authors with insights to their needs and challenges faced for manufacturing uniforms. The manufacturers wanted minimal design that is easy to manufacture. The manufacturers had a concern of working with the handlooms, as they are used to procuring fabrics from the mills and were apprehensive about the timely availability of fabrics in the required quantity.

#### ***Identification of Handloom Fabrics and Crafts for Uniform***

The authors as designers of the uniform attempted to give design solutions by connecting the indigenous crafts with identity creation. The paper is an attempt to create strong liaisons and work opportunities for the local artisans. The sample selection, based on convenient sampling method was from the Western region of India in the state of Maharashtra. Maharashtra is known for varied handwoven textiles like Paithani sarees, Karvath Kati sarees, Solapuri chaddars, Solapuri cotton sarees, Khund fabric, Kosa silk, Solapur Wall Hangings and Himroo shawls.



Figure 6. (left) Solapur Cotton saree weaver      Figure 7. (right) Solapur wall hanging weaver

Textiles like Solapuri cotton sarees (Figure 6) and Nagpur cotton sarees are the primary choices for making the uniforms as cotton fabrics with a range of 115 to 120 gsm are an ideal choice for the tropical weather of the region. It ensures good moisture wicking property for the wearer while balancing the functional, aesthetic and physiological needs of the user. The checkered pattern of the beautiful Solpauri cotton sarees resonate with the checkered shirting material commonly seen in the uniform segment. Along with the identification of cotton sarees from Solapur and Nagpur for the top wear, Khadi fabric is proposed for trousers, waistcoats and jackets. Khadi is a hand spun and hand woven fabric which is part of India's cultural identity and spirit of India's freedom struggle. Khadi fabric of 125 to 140 gsm weight was chosen for making of the trousers, waistcoats and jackets. Khund fabric was used for the Shawl collar facing and borders at the hem of the jacket for value addition and stylish looks for the uniform. The designers have attempted to promote the indigenous crafts and every aspect of the uniform involves providing livelihood to local artisans. The belt for the uniform is developed in association with the artisans of Solapur wall hangings (Figure 7). The sturdy tapestry weave of Solapur wall hangings ticks off the requirement of having a belt in the uniform while providing a new product diversification to the weavers. These belts were finished with the Bidri craft buckle. Thus, varied crafts and handlooms of the local region were identified to develop the uniform. The indigenous crafts and their products intersect with all the cultural domain including social, political, ritual and economic domains to provide a social identity (Kramer, 2001). The authors make an attempt to connect community identity that a uniform provides with craft to help establish a strong sense of belongingness for the students.

### ***Design Solutions for Uniform***

The authors took on the role of designers with a responsibility to take forward the country's rich cultural heritage forward to the future generations. The design solutions looked at connecting the beauty of craft, the hand woven warp and weft to a future solution, where the students are sensitised towards their cultural history. The needs assessment and review of

literature led the authors to provide a design solution that aims at promoting the crafts and their importance to GenZ. The idea is to create a pathway to move the unorganised crafts sector to a more organised structure by creating a constant demand of livelihood for artisans through the design solution. Based on all the discussions with the users (female students), academicians (teachers) as well as manufacturers, the features for designing the school uniform were shortlisted as follows:

- A kurta design variation with a collar to minimise a third additional piece (dupatta) for clothing.
- The Kurta design with have belt for size adjustment.
- The Kurta to have pockets for functionality.
- Straight fit pants with elasticated waist band for comfort.
- The textiles selected were Solapuri cotton sarees and khadi solid fabric.
- A jacket to be provided as part of winter uniform with trims and details of Khund fabric.
- Overall design of the uniform should be aesthetic and stylish.

The research and brainstorming led the authors to explore various design options as showcased in Figure 8.

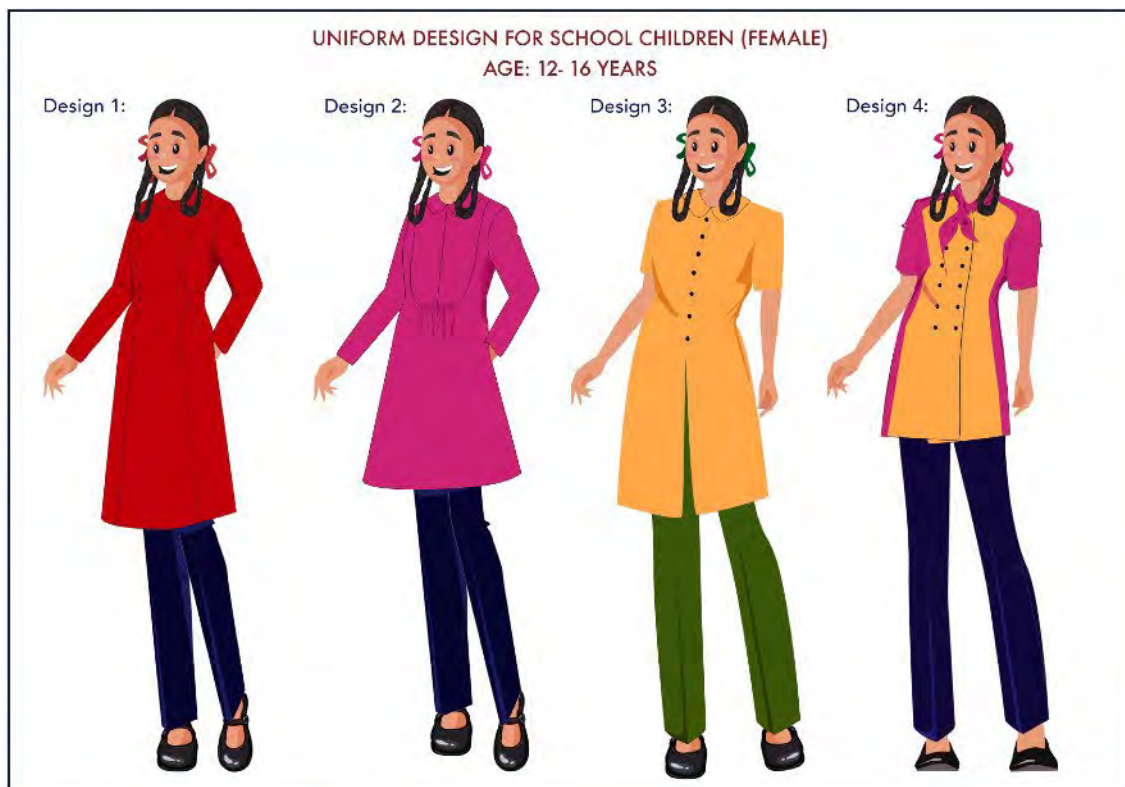


Figure 8: Designs proposed for uniform for school children (female)

The designs were evaluated by the identified users and Design 1 (Figure 9) was selected to be developed as a prototype.



Figure 9. Final Design specification sheets for the selected design

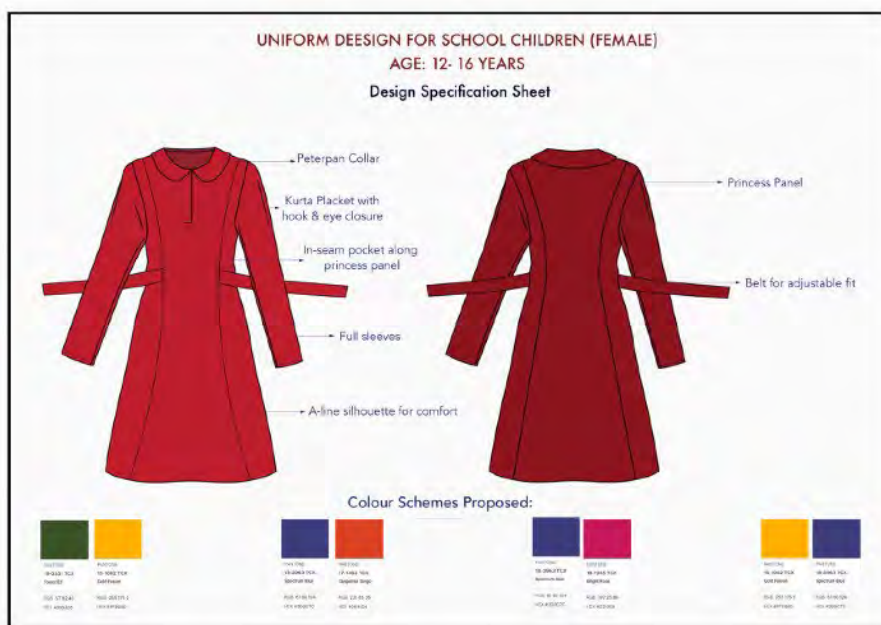


Figure 10. Final Design specification sheet of the Tunic Kurta

The final specification sheet of the Kurta design (as seen in Figure 10) comprises of a flat Peter Pan collar and princess panel using a red Solapuri cotton saree. There are in-seam pockets provided at the princess panel seam. A belt starting from the princess panel that can be tied at

the back to give the desired fit and adjustment. If not required, the belt can be folded inside the pocket. This adjustment scope creates an opportunity to cater to the expectations of a wider spectrum of users. As per the feedback in the interview schedule, a tapered fit pant with elasticated waistband is suggested for the lower garment (Figure 11). For the winter uniform a Khadi jacket was proposed with shawl collar in *Khund* fabric.



Figure 11. Final Design specification sheet of the trouser

### ***Evaluation of Proposed Design***

The prototypes were developed based on the selected design (Figure 12). The final design comprised of a tunic, trouser, waistcoat, jacket, a Solapur wall hanging belt with a Bidri crafted buckle. Feedback from the stakeholders was taken at the design stage. The feedback was positive and the designed uniform was developed using a red Solapuri cotton saree and Navy blue khadi fabric. To understand the practicality, comfort and commercial feasibility of the uniform textile testing was done using the international standards for testing.



Figure 12. Prototype of the selected design with details of design features

### *Textile Testing*

The handloom textiles used to develop the uniforms were evaluated for various textile properties that determine the functionality and comfort feasibility of the fabrics for usage as uniforms for school children. The fabrics were tested for the following properties:

- a. Fibre identification: The test method IS667 was used to identify the fabrics. It was noted that the Solapuri saree material used to make the Kurta was comprising of 91% cotton and 9% viscose, while the blue khadi fabric for jackets, waistcoat and trousers was 100% cotton.
- b. Dimensional changes to washing: The test method ISO6330 and ISO5077 at 40 degrees after one wash and flat drying was used to determine the dimensional changes in the fabric after washing. Both the fabrics showed dimensional stability was within the accepted norms. This is a crucial parameter for the textile testing as the uniforms would undergo washing very frequently.
- c. Colour Fastness to Perspiration: The test method ISO105-E04 was used to test the fabrics for colour fastness to perspiration. Both the fabrics passed the test with a grade of 4-5.
- d. Colour Fastness to Rubbing: The test method IS 766 was used to determine the colour fastness to rubbing. Both the fabrics passed the test with a grade of 4/4.
- e. Colour Fastness to Artificial Light: The test method IS 2454 was used to determine the colour fastness to rubbing. Both the fabrics passed the test with a grade of 4-5.
- f. Weight of the sample: The weight of the fabric for Kurta was found to be 68 gsm. It was lined to ensure that the garment worked well for the weather conditions of the region. The weight of the fabric used for jacket, waistcoat and trousers was found to be 128 gsm.
- g. Breaking Strength: The ravelled strip, IS 1969, test method was used to determine the breaking strength of the fabrics. Both the fabrics showed acceptable levels of breaking strength.
- h. Tear Resistance: The Elmendorf Method was used to determine the tear resistance of the two fabrics. Both the fabrics showed acceptable levels of tear resistance.

### *Evaluation of Design Features*

The prototypes were evaluated by identifying girls aged 12-16 years from the local vicinity of 10 schools based on convenient sampling. The feedback from the girls was positive. One such user said that finally she feels excited to go to school and see her friends as well in these uniforms which they feel are “so stylish.” Another user exclaimed that the blazers made the whole ensemble look so chic, which we never thought that a term could be associated with a school uniform. The designs were found to effortlessly combine innovation with artisanal offering of traditional handcrafted materials.

### *Economic Feasibility and Benefits of Crafts for Uniform*

An effective design solution is driven by its economic feasibility. The authors evaluated the proposed design solution for its economic feasibility to understand if the solution is practical to be implemented for production. A comparative analysis was done with regards to the cost of manufacturing a uniform using handcrafted materials against the conventional school uniforms at present. It was observed that the cost of making a tunic Kurta from handwoven Solapuri cotton saree was merely seven per cent higher as against a regular shirt/kurta in school uniforms which are manufactured at a cost of Rs.350. The trousers made from hand spun, hand woven Khadi fabric was found to be 12.5 per cent higher than regular trousers. The belt developed from Solapuri wall hanging weavers cost the same as a conventional belt.

The blazer and the waistcoat from Khadi fabric cost 12.5 per cent and five percent more than the existing uniforms. This tiny increment of the cost in return was found to provide a much higher value to the garment by being environment friendly and providing livelihood to artisans while enriching the future generation with the knowledge about their cultural roots. Lance Taylor in his article on the importance of cost in design has brought focus on this aspect where he talks about how whole life costs and combining economic viability with sustainability are the important drivers for clients looking for maximum return on good design. This has been the primary focus of the authors, as the design solution while being commercially viable provides boost to local economy with a lower carbon footprint. The inclusion of traditional fabrics and crafts as uniform also educates the future generation about India's heritage and cultural identity. It provides an opportunity to bring a paradigm shift in the craft sector to help it move towards an organised sector.

### **Conclusion**

The authors through this paper have designed a performance wear in form of uniforms for school children using the indigenous crafts that provide the crafts a global platform of recognition. The design solution was evaluated for its functional, physiological and aesthetic role at each stage of the design development and positive feedback was received. The prototypes developed using the proposed handcrafted materials were evaluated by all the stakeholders as well as tested in a certified textile laboratory to understand the real scope of using them for creating performance wear. It is after all the evaluations and consideration of the feedback, that a successful design solution is being proposed by the authors. The design has a scope of being implemented by clusters as it meets the economic feasibility test. The research has future scope of being amplified across the globe where each region can look at reinventing their indigenous crafts for performance wear.

The performance wear designed using the local crafts supports well-being and the community, while providing a sense of belongingness. It is driven by a realignment of values as the uniforms support the local artisans. The designs celebrate the cultural heritage that binds and supports the local economy, artisans, cultures and communities. It champions the value of interdependence as well as the power of resilience. On a functional level, this direction focuses on a design of uniform that feeds on the sense of providing a new opportunity to the indigenous

crafts of product diversification into a segment that provides long-term work opportunities. On an aesthetic level, this direction of uniform design is characterised by designs that are celebration of the local culture and sensitise the future generations by depicting a clear connection to the cultural roots. It is about firmly moving forward to a future by drawing on all that carries us and connects us with who we are and providing community growth and identity. If this design can be adapted across the country, it has the potential to become a platform for great cultural exchange and can help to establish economic stability in backward communities with local production, where the uniforms begin to reflect local culture by incorporating the workmanship of indigenous crafts.

It is the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) that those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.

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