



Re-evaluating Ancestral Tailoring in India: From Service Trade to Craft Heritage

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Abstract

Tailoring has historically been central to the construction of garments and the expression of clothing traditions across cultures. In India, hereditary tailoring communities such as the Darzis developed specialised systems of knowledge that include body measurement techniques, pattern drafting, fabric manipulation, and complex garment construction. These skills require considerable manual expertise, aesthetic judgement, and technical understanding, and have traditionally been transmitted through apprenticeship and family-based training systems. Such characteristics correspond closely with widely accepted definitions of craftsmanship, in which knowledge is embodied in skilled practice and transmitted across generations. Despite these attributes, tailoring in India has rarely been recognised as a craft or art within institutional craft frameworks and is more commonly classified as a service occupation. This classification has contributed to the marginalisation of ancestral tailoring within craft discourse and its limited representation within organisations dedicated to the preservation and promotion of traditional crafts, including bodies such as the Crafts Council of India.

Building on the premise that ancestral tailoring constitutes a form of craftsmanship, this paper examines its relevance within the framework of intangible cultural heritage. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage identifies traditional craftsmanship as a key domain of intangible heritage, emphasising the knowledge and skills embedded within craft practices rather than merely the objects produced. By analysing the embodied skills, tacit knowledge, and intergenerational transmission inherent in traditional tailoring practices, the study demonstrates that ancestral tailoring fulfils the defining characteristics of traditional craftsmanship and therefore qualifies for consideration within the domain of intangible cultural heritage.

To further contextualise this argument, the paper undertakes a comparative examination of tailoring traditions in other cultural contexts where garment-making knowledge has historically

been recognised as a specialised craft practice. Examples from tailoring traditions in the United Kingdom, Singapore, and China illustrate how tailoring has been preserved and acknowledged as an artisanal knowledge system in different cultural settings. Through this comparative perspective, the paper highlights the need to reconsider ancestral tailoring in India not merely as a service trade but as a traditional craft practice whose knowledge systems merit recognition within both national craft institutions and broader frameworks of intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Traditional tailoring, intangible cultural heritage, traditional craftsmanship, garment construction, Darzi community, craft heritage policy in India.

Introduction

Clothing traditions across societies have historically depended not only on the production of textiles but also on the specialised knowledge required to transform fabric into garments. While considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to textile crafts such as weaving, dyeing, embroidery, and block printing, the craft of garment construction, particularly tailoring, has received comparatively limited recognition within craft heritage discourse. In India, the making of garments through skilled tailoring has long been practised by hereditary communities - *Darzis*, who developed sophisticated systems of measurement, pattern drafting, and garment construction. These practices required technical expertise, aesthetic judgement, and a deep understanding of fabric behaviour, all of which were traditionally transmitted through apprenticeship and family-based training systems.

Despite possessing many characteristics associated with traditional craftsmanship, tailoring in India is often categorised primarily as a service occupation rather than a craft practice. This classification has had important implications for how tailoring is perceived within institutional and policy frameworks. Unlike weaving, pottery, or metalwork activities widely acknowledged as crafts, tailoring has rarely been formally included within institutional craft recognition structures or craft heritage initiatives. As a result, the artisanal knowledge embedded within ancestral tailoring traditions remains underrepresented in discussions of Indian craft heritage and receives limited scholarly attention in comparison with other textile-related crafts.

The marginalisation of tailoring within craft discourse raises an important conceptual question. Craft scholarship generally defines craft practices through several core characteristics, including specialised manual skill, embodied and tacit knowledge, apprenticeship-based learning, and the intergenerational transmission of technical expertise. Traditional tailoring practices in India appear to exhibit many of these attributes. Tailors historically possessed specialised knowledge of body measurement systems, garment proportion, pattern engineering, and fabric manipulation, and these skills were cultivated through prolonged training under experienced practitioners. The complexity and depth of these practices suggest that tailoring should be examined not merely as a service trade but as a form of artisanal knowledge embedded within clothing traditions.

Recognising tailoring as a craft practice has further implications for its position within broader frameworks of cultural heritage. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage identifies traditional craftsmanship as one of the key domains of intangible

cultural heritage, emphasising the knowledge and skills involved in making rather than simply the objects produced. If ancestral tailoring practices can be demonstrated to possess the defining characteristics of craftsmanship, they may logically fall within the domain of traditional craftsmanship recognised in intangible cultural heritage discourse. However, the limited recognition of tailoring within institutional craft structures complicates this classification and highlights the need for closer scholarly examination.

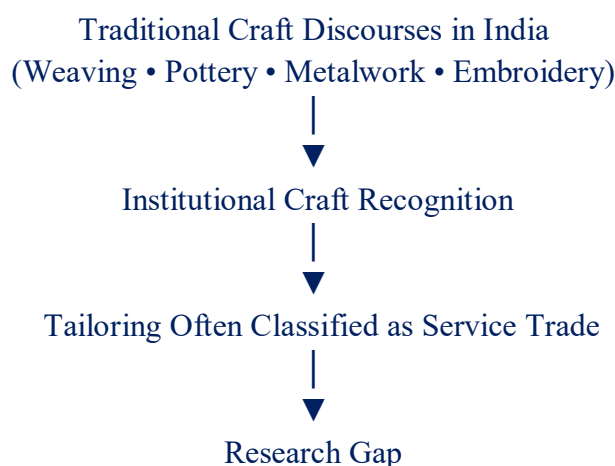
This study therefore seeks to reconsider ancestral tailoring traditions within the broader context of craft and cultural heritage studies. It addresses the following research questions:

1. Can ancestral tailoring in India be understood as a form of traditional craftsmanship?
2. Why has tailoring historically remained under-recognised within institutional craft frameworks?
3. If tailoring qualifies as craftsmanship, how might it be situated within the framework of intangible cultural heritage?
4. How do tailoring traditions in other cultural contexts inform this discussion?

To address these questions, the paper first examines the characteristics of traditional craftsmanship and evaluates whether ancestral tailoring practices fulfil these criteria. It then situates tailoring within the conceptual framework of intangible cultural heritage, particularly the domain of traditional craftsmanship identified in international heritage discourse. Finally, the study considers comparative examples of tailoring traditions in other cultural contexts to illustrate how garment construction has been historically recognised as a specialised craft practice in different parts of the world.

By reframing tailoring as a form of artisanal practice rather than merely a service occupation, this paper aims to contribute to a broader understanding of craft traditions within clothing cultures. It argues that ancestral tailoring in India embodies complex systems of embodied skill, tacit knowledge, and intergenerational transmission that align closely with the defining attributes of traditional craftsmanship. Recognising these practices as craft traditions is an important step toward situating tailoring within wider discussions of cultural heritage and craft preservation.

At the same time, ancestral tailoring traditions are increasingly facing pressures that threaten their long-term continuity. The expansion of ready-made garment industries and the widespread availability of inexpensive mass-produced clothing have reduced the demand for bespoke tailoring in many contexts. However, economic competition from industrial production is only one dimension of this transformation. Traditional tailoring has also been affected by the declining social status of hereditary occupations, the weakening of apprenticeship systems, and the limited recognition of tailoring within institutional craft frameworks. In comparison with other artisanal traditions such as weaving, pottery, or metalwork, tailoring has rarely been acknowledged as a craft practice deserving cultural appreciation or policy support. These combined factors have contributed to the gradual erosion of traditional tailoring knowledge and raise concerns about the potential loss of specialised garment-making skills that have been transmitted across generations. Without systematic documentation, recognition, and support, the knowledge systems embedded within ancestral tailoring practices risk gradual erosion over time.



Is Ancestral Tailoring a Craft Practice
 and Potential Intangible Cultural Heritage?

Note. Conceptual framework developed by the author.

Figure 1: Research Gap in the Recognition of Tailoring within Craft Heritage Discourse

The conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1 highlights the central research gap addressed in this study. While numerous traditional crafts in India, such as weaving, pottery, metalwork, leather work, and embroidery, have been widely recognised within institutional craft discourse, tailoring has frequently been classified as a service occupation rather than an artisanal practice. This classification has contributed to the relative absence of tailoring within craft heritage scholarship and institutional recognition structures. As a result, the technical knowledge and cultural practices embedded within ancestral tailoring traditions remain underexplored. Addressing this gap requires a closer examination of tailoring as a form of craftsmanship and an evaluation of its potential place within broader frameworks of cultural heritage. Building on this premise, this paper argues that ancestral tailoring in India constitutes a form of traditional craftsmanship that has been historically overlooked within institutional craft frameworks and therefore merits recognition within both craft heritage discourse and the domain of intangible cultural heritage.

Establishing Tailoring as Craft: Knowledge, Skill, and Artisanal Practice

The classification of tailoring as a service occupation has historically obscured the complex knowledge systems and technical skills embedded within traditional garment construction. In many societies, tailoring has been perceived primarily as a functional trade associated with clothing production rather than as an artisanal practice. However, when examined through the analytical frameworks used in craft studies and the anthropology of skill, traditional tailoring practices exhibit many of the defining characteristics associated with recognised craft traditions (Sennett 2008; Adamson 2007). These characteristics include specialised technical knowledge, embodied and tacit skills, apprenticeship-based learning, manual dexterity, and the intergenerational transmission of expertise. Understanding tailoring through this lens enables a more nuanced interpretation of garment-making traditions and challenges the assumption that tailoring is merely a service activity.

Specialised Technical Knowledge

One of the defining features of craft traditions is the possession of advanced Embodied technical knowledge acquired through sustained practice and experience (Sennett 2008). Tailoring involves a complex system of garment engineering that extends far beyond basic sewing skills. Traditional tailors must understand body proportions, measurement systems, pattern construction, and the structural assembly of garments. These processes require careful calculation and spatial reasoning, as the transformation of flat fabric into a three-dimensional garment involves multiple stages of planning, cutting, and stitching.

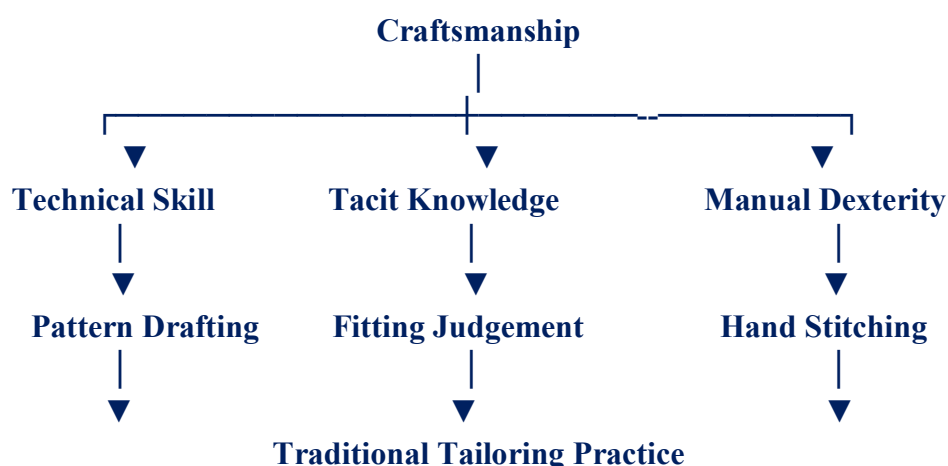
Pattern drafting, in particular, represents a sophisticated form of technical knowledge (Dormer 1997). Tailors translate body measurements into pattern shapes that determine the structure and fit of the garment. This process requires an understanding of proportion, balance, and garment architecture. The intellectual dimension of pattern-making aligns closely with the technical knowledge found in other recognised crafts such as woodworking, metalwork, or weaving, where artisans must understand the structural properties of materials and the processes through which they are shaped.

Embodied and Tacit Knowledge

Craft practices are frequently characterised by forms of knowledge that are difficult to codify or transmit through written instructions alone. Such knowledge is often described as tacit or embodied, developing through repeated engagement with materials and tools. Scholars of craft and skill have emphasised that artisanal expertise emerges through sustained practice rather than formal theoretical instruction (Sennett 2008; Polanyi 1966).

In tailoring, many crucial decisions depend on the practitioner's sensory judgement and accumulated experience. Tailors learn to assess body posture, shoulder slope, and garment balance by observation and touch. Similarly, the manipulation of fabric during cutting and stitching requires sensitivity to the behaviour of different materials. These skills cannot be easily reduced to fixed rules, as each body and each fabric presents unique challenges. The tacit nature of tailoring knowledge thus situates the practice firmly within the broader category of craft traditions (Adamson 2007), where expertise resides in the skilled actions of the practitioner.

The framework illustrated in Figure 2 highlights the core craft attributes embedded within traditional tailoring practices. At the centre of this framework is the concept of craftsmanship, which emerges from the interaction of specialised technical knowledge, tacit and embodied understanding, and skilled manual execution. Technical knowledge in tailoring encompasses measurement systems, pattern drafting, and the structural planning required to transform flat fabric into three-dimensional garments. Complementing this technical dimension is tacit knowledge acquired through sustained practice, including the ability to interpret body posture, adjust garment balance, and anticipate the behaviour of different fabrics.



Note: Conceptual diagram illustrating the interaction between technical knowledge, tacit skill, and manual craftsmanship in traditional tailoring practice.

Figure 2: Core Characteristics of Craftsmanship in Traditional Tailoring

Finally, manual dexterity and hand-based techniques remain essential in garment construction, particularly in processes such as precise cutting, hand stitching, and finishing. Together, these interconnected elements demonstrate that tailoring embodies the defining characteristics of craft practice, where knowledge, skill, and material engagement converge to produce a specialised form of artisanal expertise.

Apprenticeship and Intergenerational Transmission

Another defining characteristic of craft traditions is the transmission of skills through apprenticeship (Sennett 2008) and long-term mentorship. In many traditional craft systems, knowledge is passed from experienced practitioners to younger learners through observation, imitation, and guided practice. Tailoring has historically followed similar patterns of transmission.

In India, tailoring knowledge was frequently transmitted within hereditary occupational ‘*darzi*’ communities, where younger members of the family learned the craft through participation in workshop activities. Apprentices often began with simple tasks such as threading needles, preparing fabric, or observing measurement techniques before gradually progressing to more complex stages of garment construction. This incremental learning process allowed apprentices to internalise the technical and aesthetic principles of the craft over time.

The apprenticeship model of skill transmission is a hallmark of artisanal traditions worldwide (Dormer 1997) and reflects a broader cultural understanding of craftsmanship as knowledge cultivated through sustained practice rather than formal institutional training.

Manual Dexterity and Skilled Handwork

Craft practices typically involve a high degree of manual dexterity (Sennett 2008) and the skilled use of specialised tools. Traditional tailoring relies on a combination of hand techniques and mechanical tools that require precision and control. Cutting fabric accurately according to pattern

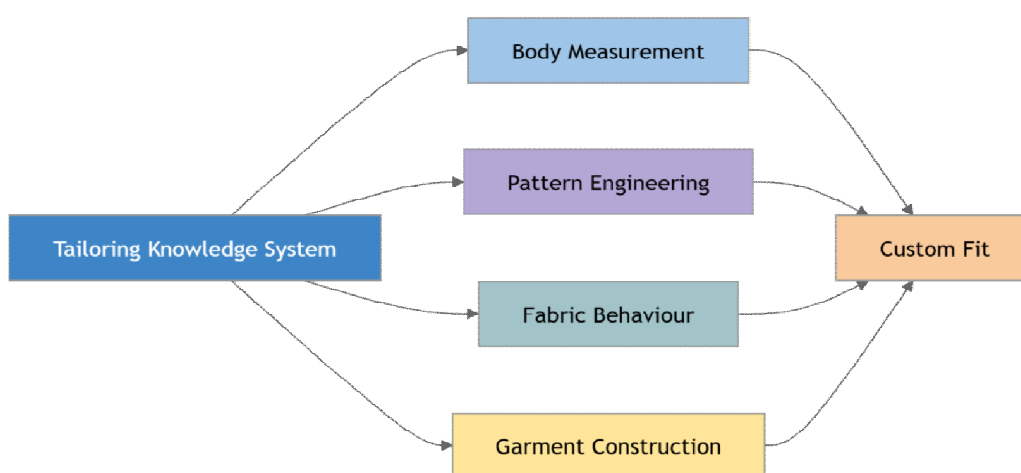
shapes demands steady hand movement and careful attention to alignment, while stitching requires consistent tension and rhythm to ensure the durability and appearance of the garment.

Even with the introduction of sewing machines, many stages of tailoring continue to rely on hand-finishing techniques. Invisible hemming, buttonhole stitching, padding stitches, and garment shaping often require manual intervention that cannot be fully mechanised. The continued reliance on skilled handwork reinforces the classification of tailoring as a craft practice grounded in manual expertise.

Material Knowledge and Fabric Behaviour

Artisans across craft traditions possess deep knowledge of the materials with which they work.(Dormer1997). In tailoring, the primary material is fabric, whose properties can vary widely depending on fibre type, weave structure, weight, and elasticity. Successful garment construction requires an understanding of howdifferent fabrics respond to cutting, stitching, and pressing.

For instance, wool, cotton, silk, and synthetic fibres each exhibit distinct behaviours when manipulated during garment construction. Tailors must anticipate how fabrics will drape, stretch, or shrink, adjusting their techniques accordingly. This material sensitivity parallels the knowledge possessed by potters who understand the behaviour of clay or by metalworkers who recognise the properties of different alloys.



Note: Conceptual framework illustrating the interconnected domains of knowledge—measurement, pattern drafting, fabric behaviour, and garment construction—that underpin traditional tailoring practice

Figure 3: Knowledge System in Tailoring Craft

Figure 3 illustrates the interconnected knowledge systems that underpin traditional tailoring practice. Unlike industrial garment production, which often separates design, pattern-making, and assembly into distinct processes, traditional tailoring integrates multiple forms of expertise within the skillset of the practitioner. Tailors must possess detailed knowledge of body measurement techniques, pattern engineering, fabric behaviour, and garment construction methods. These domains are not independent but function as interrelated components of a unified craft knowledge system. For example, the interpretation of body measurements directly informs pattern drafting, while an understanding of fabric properties influences cutting, stitching, and

garment shaping. The integration of these knowledge domains ultimately enables the production of garments tailored to individual bodies and preferences. This holistic structure of knowledge reinforces the interpretation of tailoring as a craft practice, characterised by the synthesis of technical understanding, material awareness, and skilled execution.

Creative and Aesthetic Judgement

Although tailoring is often perceived as purely technical, it also involves significant elements of design judgement and aesthetic interpretation. Tailors must consider the relationship between garment form, body shape, and stylistic conventions when constructing clothing. Decisions regarding seam placement, garment proportion, collar structure, and sleeve shape influence both the functionality and visual appearance of the garment.

Traditional tailoring practices frequently involve adapting established garment styles to individual clients while maintaining cultural conventions associated with particular clothing forms. This combination of technical precision and aesthetic judgement reflects the broader creative dimension of craft practice.

Cultural Embeddedness of Garment Construction:

Garment construction has historically been closely intertwined with cultural traditions and social identities. In India, tailors played a central role in producing garments that formed part of regional clothing systems, ceremonial attire, and courtly dress. Garments such as the *angarkha*, *jama*, *sherwani*, and *churidar* required specialised construction techniques that evolved through generations of practice. (Tarlo 1996; Tortora & Eubank 2015) The making of these garments involved not only technical skill but also an understanding of cultural aesthetics, social conventions, and functional requirements associated with particular forms of dress. Through their work, tailors contributed to the continuity of clothing traditions that were deeply embedded within the social and cultural fabric of Indian society.

Historical examples of garment adaptation further illustrate the creative and technical role played by traditional tailors. One notable instance is the development of the Jodhpur breeches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing inspiration from European riding breeches used by British cavalry officers, Indian tailors modified the garment to suit local riding practices and climatic conditions. The resulting design incorporated distinctive flared hips and carefully placed pleats that allowed greater freedom of movement while narrowing at the calf to fit securely within riding boots. This structural adaptation improved comfort and mobility for horse riders and polo players, and the practicality of the design eventually led to its adoption beyond India, including among British riders. (Steele 2005)

The colonial period also witnessed the emergence of hybrid garments that combined indigenous clothing traditions with elements of European tailoring. (Tarlo 1996; Steele 2005). Indian tailors played a significant role in this process of sartorial synthesis by adapting established garments to new stylistic and structural influences introduced through colonial interaction. The *sherwani*, for instance, evolved as a garment that integrated features associated with earlier Indo-Persian dress forms such as the *angarkha* with structural elements derived from European coats, including

front button closures, pockets, and stand collars(Tarlo 1996; Tortora& Eubank 2015). Over time, the garment became widely associated with formal and ceremonial attire across South Asia. These examples illustrate how tailoring practices did not merely reproduce established clothing forms but actively participated in processes of cultural adaptation, technical experimentation, and stylistic innovation.

Taken together, these historical developments demonstrate that tailoring has long functioned as a culturally embedded craft practice. Tailors were not simply executing predetermined designs but were actively interpreting social norms, responding to new influences, and modifying garments to meet changing functional and aesthetic needs. Such practices highlight the dynamic nature of garment construction traditions and reinforce the position of tailoring within broader discussions of craftsmanship and cultural heritage.

Customisation and Individual Fit

Unlike industrial garment production, traditional tailoring emphasises individualised production based on the specific measurements and preferences of the wearer. Each garment is constructed for a particular body, requiring careful measurement, fitting, and adjustment. This process of customisation reflects a key characteristic of craft production(Sennett 2008),where objects are produced through skilled labour rather than standardised mass manufacturing.

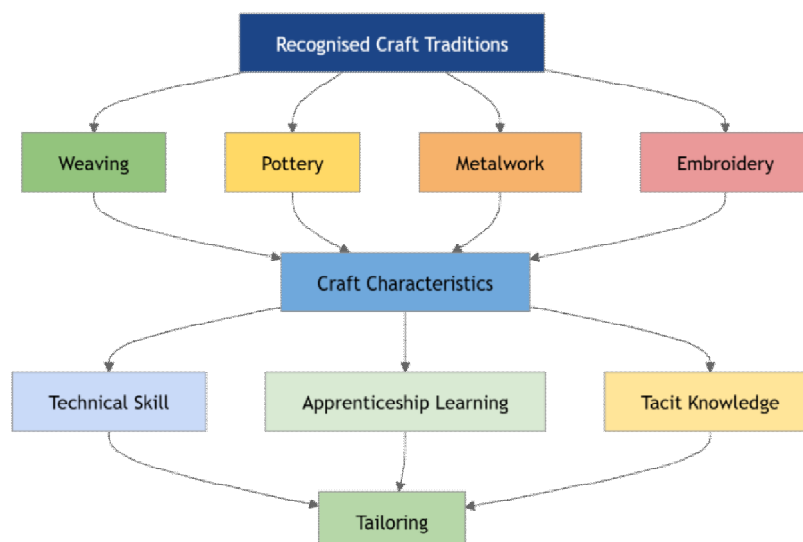
The ability to achieve precise garment fit requires technical expertise and repeated refinement during the construction process. Tailors often conduct multiple fittings to ensure that the garment conforms to the wearer’s body and movement patterns, demonstrating the iterative nature of craft practice.

Historical Continuity of Tailoring Traditions

Craft traditions are often defined by their historical continuity and long-standing cultural presence (Smith 2006). Tailoring has existed as a specialised occupation in many societies for centuries. Historical records from medieval and early modern periods document the presence of tailors serving royal courts, urban populations, and regional communities.

The persistence of tailoring traditions across generations indicates that garment construction has long been recognised as a specialised skill requiring training and expertise. This historical continuity reinforces the classification of tailoring as a craft tradition rather than a purely modern service trade.

Figure 4 provides a comparative perspective by situating tailoring alongside other widely recognised craft traditions such as weaving, pottery, metalwork, and embroidery. Although these crafts differ in materials and techniques, they share several defining characteristics, including specialised technical skill, apprenticeship-based learning, embodied and tacit knowledge, and the use of manual expertise in transforming raw materials into functional or aesthetic objects. Traditional tailoring practices demonstrate these same attributes.



Note: Comparative framework demonstrating that tailoring shares core characteristics of craftsmanship-technical skill, apprenticeship-based learning, tacit knowledge, and manual expertise-with other recognised craft traditions.

Figure 4: Tailoring Compared with Recognised Craft Traditions

Tailors possess specialised knowledge of body measurement systems, pattern drafting, fabric behaviour, and garment construction, all of which are developed through sustained practice and mentorship. Furthermore, tailoring historically operated within hereditary occupational communities where skills were transmitted across generations in ways comparable to other artisanal traditions. By highlighting these shared characteristics, the framework illustrated in Figure 4 underscores that tailoring aligns structurally with recognised craft practices and therefore merits reconsideration within broader discussions of craftsmanship and craft heritage.

Tailoring Communities as Craft Practitioners

Finally, the social organisation of tailoring within hereditary communities further supports its classification as a craft practice. Occupational groups associated with tailoring historically functioned in ways comparable to other artisan communities. Members of these communities shared knowledge, tools, and professional identities centred on garment-making expertise.

Such social structures reflect a broader pattern found across craft traditions (Adamson 2007), where occupational identity and technical knowledge are closely intertwined. Recognising tailoring communities as craft practitioners therefore provides an important perspective for understanding the cultural significance of garment-making traditions.

Taken together, these characteristics demonstrate that traditional tailoring embodies the essential attributes associated with craft traditions. Tailoring involves specialised technical knowledge, embodied skill (Sennett 2008; Dormer 1997), apprenticeship-based learning, and deep familiarity with materials and tools. These attributes challenge the conventional classification of tailoring as a mere service occupation and instead position it within the broader category of artisanal practices. Establishing tailoring as a craft practice provides the conceptual foundation for examining its relationship to broader frameworks of cultural heritage, including the domain of traditional craftsmanship within intangible cultural heritage discourse (UNESCO 2003).

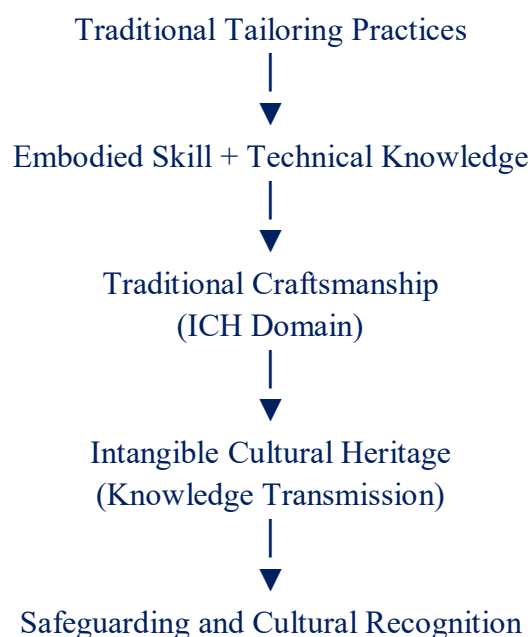
While the preceding discussion establishes tailoring as a form of craftsmanship, the implications of this classification extend beyond occupational categorisation. Craft practices that involve specialised knowledge, practise based skills, and intergenerational transmission are frequently understood within broader frameworks of cultural heritage. In particular, contemporary heritage scholarship recognises traditional craftsmanship as a significant domain of intangible cultural heritage. Examining tailoring through this perspective allows garment construction practices to be reconsidered not only as technical skills but also as cultural knowledge systems embedded within communities. The following section therefore situates traditional tailoring within the conceptual framework of intangible cultural heritage.

Tailoring and Intangible Cultural Heritage

The preceding section established that traditional tailoring embodies many of the defining characteristics associated with craft traditions, including specialised technical knowledge, embodied skill, apprenticeship-based learning, and intergenerational transmission of expertise. These attributes align closely with the conceptual framework of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which emphasises knowledge systems, practices, and skills transmitted within communities across generations (UNESCO 2003). Understanding tailoring through this heritage framework allows the practice to be reconsidered not merely as a service occupation but as a form of traditional craftsmanship embedded within cultural knowledge systems.

The international recognition of intangible cultural heritage gained prominence with the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003). The convention defines intangible cultural heritage as the practices, representations, knowledge, and skills that communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003) and that are transmitted from generation to generation. Importantly, UNESCO identifies traditional craftsmanship as one of the primary domains of intangible heritage.²⁰ In this context, the emphasis lies not only on the objects produced by craftspeople but also on the technical knowledge, skills, and cultural meanings associated with the process of making.

The recognition of traditional craftsmanship within the framework of intangible cultural heritage can be observed in several UNESCO-inscribed craft traditions across the world. For instance, the traditional brass and copper craft of utensil making among the Thatheras of Jandiala Guru in Punjab has been recognised for its specialised metallurgical knowledge and hereditary transmission of skills (UNESCO 2014). Similarly, the craftsmanship involved in the making of the Indonesian *kris*, a traditional dagger, has been acknowledged for its complex forging techniques, symbolic meanings, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge (UNESCO 2008). These examples demonstrate that heritage recognition often focuses not merely on the material objects produced but on the knowledge systems, technical expertise, and cultural meanings embedded within craft practices. When viewed through this perspective, tailoring characterised by specialised pattern drafting, garment engineering, and apprenticeship-based learning, shares many of the attributes that define recognised traditions of traditional craftsmanship.



Note: Conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between tailoring practices, traditional craftsmanship, and intangible cultural heritage.

Figure 5: Tailoring as Traditional Craftsmanship within the Intangible Cultural Heritage Framework

Figure 5 illustrates the conceptual relationship between traditional tailoring practices and the framework of intangible cultural heritage. At the foundation of this relationship are the embodied skills and specialised technical knowledge developed through the practice of tailoring, including measurement systems, pattern drafting, garment construction, and material understanding. These forms of expertise collectively constitute traditional craftsmanship, a domain recognised within the international framework of intangible cultural heritage. When transmitted through apprenticeship systems and community-based learning, such knowledge becomes part of a broader cultural heritage that extends beyond the physical garments produced. The framework therefore highlights how tailoring can be understood not merely as a service activity but as a knowledge-based craft practice whose techniques, skills, and cultural meanings form part of intangible cultural heritage. Recognising this relationship also underscores the importance of safeguarding the knowledge systems embedded within ancestral tailoring traditions.

Within this framework, tailoring can be understood as a knowledge-based craft practice in which expertise is embodied in the actions of skilled practitioners. Tailors possess specialised understanding of measurement systems, pattern drafting, garment engineering, and fabric behaviour, all of which require sustained training and practical experience. Much of this knowledge remains tacit, transmitted through observation and apprenticeship rather than through formal documentation. Such forms of knowledge transmission correspond closely with the characteristics of traditional craftsmanship described in heritage scholarship.(Polanyi 1966; Smith2006).

Moreover, tailoring practices have historically been embedded within specific social and occupational communities. In many regions of India, hereditary tailoring groups such as the Darzis maintained systems of training and skill transmission through family-based learning and

workshop apprenticeships. These systems ensured the continuity of technical knowledge across generations while also preserving distinctive garment construction techniques associated with regional clothing traditions. The collective nature of this knowledge transmission reflects a key principle of intangible cultural heritage: that cultural practices are sustained through communities rather than individual practitioners alone.

Despite possessing these characteristics, tailoring has rarely been discussed within heritage frameworks in the same way as other craft traditions such as weaving, pottery, or metalwork (Smith 2006). One reason for this omission lies in the tendency to associate craft heritage primarily with decorative or material objects, whereas tailoring is often categorised as a service activity within contemporary economic classifications. This distinction obscures the fact that tailoring involves highly specialised knowledge and creative decision-making comparable to other recognised craft traditions. Reframing tailoring within the domain of traditional craftsmanship therefore provides a necessary step toward acknowledging its cultural significance.

Recognising tailoring as an element of intangible cultural heritage also highlights the importance of safeguarding the knowledge systems embedded within the craft (UNESCO 2003). As discussed earlier, hereditary tailoring traditions have increasingly faced pressures arising from industrial garment production, shifting consumption patterns, and the declining social status of artisanal occupations. Without systematic recognition and documentation, the skills and techniques developed by generations of tailors risk gradual erosion (UNESCO 2022). Situating tailoring within the framework of intangible cultural heritage therefore provides a conceptual basis for acknowledging the cultural value of garment construction knowledge and for encouraging future efforts toward documentation, preservation, and transmission.

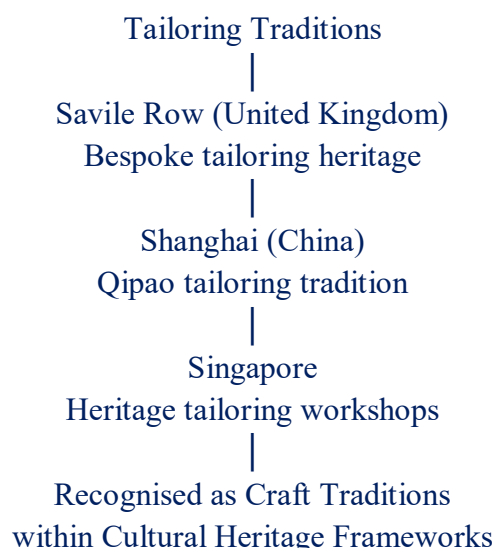
In this sense, the recognition of tailoring as intangible cultural heritage does not merely expand the catalogue of craft traditions; it also invites a broader reconsideration of how garment-making practices are understood within cultural history. Tailoring represents a form of embodied technical knowledge that connects clothing traditions, social identities, and artisanal skill. By recognising these practices within heritage discourse (Smith 2006), scholars and institutions can more effectively address the historical marginalisation of tailoring communities while preserving the specialised knowledge that underpins traditional garment construction.

Situating tailoring within the framework of intangible cultural heritage highlights the importance of recognising garment construction knowledge as a form of traditional craftsmanship. However, examining how tailoring is understood within different cultural contexts can further illuminate its status as a craft practice. A comparative perspective reveals that in several parts of the world, tailoring traditions are recognised not only as skilled trades but also as significant artisanal practices (UNESCO 2003). The following section therefore examines selected international examples of tailoring traditions to provide a broader contextual understanding of the craft.

Comparative Perspectives on Tailoring Traditions:

Examining tailoring traditions in different cultural contexts provides a broader perspective on the ways in which garment-making practices are understood as forms of craft and cultural heritage (Smith 2006). In many regions of the world, tailoring has historically been recognised not merely

as a service occupation but as a specialised craft requiring extensive training, technical expertise, and aesthetic judgement (Sennett 2008). These traditions often operate within systems of apprenticeship, guild structures, or family-based transmission of skills (UNESCO 2003), reflecting characteristics similar to those observed in hereditary tailoring communities in India. A comparative examination of selected international contexts therefore helps illuminate the broader cultural significance of tailoring as a craft practice. Selected examples of tailoring traditions recognised within cultural heritage contexts are illustrated in Figure 6.



Note: Comparative framework illustrating international recognition of tailoring traditions as craft practices.

Figure 6: Comparative Recognition of Tailoring Traditions in Global Contexts

Figure 6 summarises the comparative perspective discussed in this section by illustrating how tailoring traditions in different cultural contexts have been recognised as forms of craftsmanship embedded within heritage frameworks. The examples of Savile Row in the United Kingdom, *Qipao* tailoring in China, and heritage tailoring workshops in Singapore demonstrate that garment construction knowledge is frequently understood as a specialised craft practice sustained through apprenticeship and community-based learning (UNESCO 2003).

Table 1: Comparative Recognition of Tailoring and Garment-Making Traditions in Selected Cultural Contexts.

Country / Region	Tailoring Tradition	Mode of Skill Transmission	Heritage Recognition
India	Hereditary tailoring communities (Darzi tailors)	Family apprenticeship and community-based learning	Limited institutional recognition
China	Qipao tailoring(also known as Cheongsam tailoring)	Master–apprentice workshop training	Recognised within national heritage initiatives
Singapore	Heritage tailoring shops	Family businesses and vocational training	Documented within cultural heritage

			programmes
Japan	Kimono tailoring (Wasai)	Traditional master-apprentice systems	Protected traditional craft practice
South Korea	Hanbok garment craftsmanship	Artisan workshops and apprenticeship	National intangible heritage
Indonesia	Batik garment traditions	Community-based transmission	UNESCO intangible cultural heritage
United Kingdom	Savile Row bespoke tailoring	Formal apprenticeship and workshop training	Globally recognised craft tradition
France	Haute couture garment craftsmanship	Atelier-based apprenticeship	Recognised fashion craft heritage
Italy	Sartoria bespoke tailoring	Artisan training and apprenticeships	Traditional tailoring craft heritage

Note: The table compares tailoring and garment-making traditions recognised within cultural heritage frameworks across selected cultural contexts.

Table 1 illustrates how tailoring and garment-making traditions in several countries are recognised within heritage or cultural preservation frameworks (UNESCO 2003). In contrast, despite the presence of long-standing hereditary tailoring communities and sophisticated garment construction traditions, ancestral tailoring in India remains comparatively underrepresented within institutional craft recognition systems.

One of the most widely recognised examples of tailoring as a craft tradition can be found in the bespoke tailoring culture of Savile Row in London. Since the eighteenth century, Savile Row has been associated with highly skilled garment construction, particularly in the making of bespoke suits. Tailors working in this tradition undergo long periods of apprenticeship and training to master techniques such as pattern drafting, canvas construction, and precise garment fitting. The reputation of Savile Row tailoring rests on the combination of technical precision, manual craftsmanship, and individualised garment production. Each garment is constructed specifically for the wearer, often requiring multiple fittings and extensive hand-finishing. This emphasis on personalised craftsmanship highlights the artisanal nature of tailoring and demonstrates how garment construction knowledge is recognised and preserved within established craft traditions (Steele 2005; Breward 2003).

Another important example of garment construction recognised as a specialised craft tradition can be found in the haute couture ateliers of France. Since the nineteenth century, Paris has functioned as a global centre of fashion craftsmanship, where garments are produced through highly specialised atelier systems involving pattern makers, cutters, and seamstresses working collaboratively. Haute couture garments are constructed using meticulous hand techniques, precise pattern drafting, and multiple fittings tailored to the individual client. The knowledge associated with couture garment construction is transmitted through apprenticeship systems within fashion houses and specialised training institutions. Although haute couture is often associated with luxury fashion, its production relies fundamentally on artisanal tailoring skills and manual craftsmanship, illustrating how garment construction knowledge can acquire

institutional recognition and cultural prestige within national heritage frameworks (Kawamura 2005). The institutional recognition of couture craftsmanship in France illustrates how specialised garment construction knowledge can be preserved and valued as part of cultural heritage, a recognition that remains comparatively limited for hereditary tailoring traditions in India despite their long historical continuity.

A similar recognition of tailoring expertise can be observed in the tradition of *Qipao* or *cheongsam* tailoring in China, particularly in Shanghai. The *Qipao* became an iconic garment during the early twentieth century and required specialised tailoring skills to achieve its distinctive fitted silhouette (Tortora & Eubank 2015). Tailors developed advanced techniques of pattern drafting and garment shaping that allowed the fabric to contour closely to the body while maintaining comfort and mobility. The construction of a *Qipao* involves precise cutting, carefully positioned seams, and hand-finished closures such as the traditional *pankou* knot buttons. Workshops specialising in *Qipao* tailoring traditionally operated through master-apprentice training systems in which these techniques were transmitted through practical instruction and long-term practice. In recent years, initiatives in China have sought to document and preserve these tailoring techniques as part of broader efforts to safeguard traditional craftsmanship and cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003).

Another illustrative example can be found in Singapore, where traditional tailoring shops have been recognised as part of the city's intangible cultural heritage landscape (UNESCO 2003). Family-run tailoring establishments that once served migrant communities and local residents have been documented by cultural heritage initiatives seeking to preserve traditional trades. These tailors often specialise in both Western-style garments and regionally significant clothing forms, demonstrating the adaptability and cultural relevance of tailoring practices. Heritage documentation efforts in Singapore have emphasised the importance of preserving the knowledge and skills associated with traditional tailoring workshops as part of the city's social and cultural history.

These international examples demonstrate that tailoring traditions can be recognised as culturally significant craft practices within heritage context. The comparative evidence presented in this section illustrates how garment-making and tailoring traditions in several countries are preserved through apprenticeship systems, artisan workshops, and cultural heritage initiatives (UNESCO 2003). In contrast, the status of ancestral tailoring in India remains comparatively underexplored within institutional craft discourse. Despite its historical depth and technical sophistication, tailoring has rarely been formally acknowledged alongside other traditional crafts within policy or heritage frameworks. The following section therefore examines the institutional and historical factors that have contributed to the marginalisation of tailoring within craft recognition systems in India.

Institutional Marginalisation of Tailoring in India

The comparative examples discussed in the previous section demonstrate that tailoring traditions in several countries are recognised as culturally significant craft practices embedded within heritage frameworks (UNESCO 2003). In contrast, ancestral tailoring in India has received

comparatively limited institutional recognition within craft policy and heritage discourse (Smith 2006). This absence is particularly striking given the long historical continuity of garment-making traditions in the Indian subcontinent, which can be traced from early textile cultures of the Indus Valley through medieval courtly tailoring practices and hereditary occupational communities such as the Darzis. Understanding this gap requires examining the institutional and historical factors that shaped the classification of tailoring within Indian craft systems.

One important factor lies in the historical categorisation of tailoring as a service occupation rather than a craft tradition. Colonial administrative records and later occupational classifications frequently grouped tailoring within service-based caste occupations rather than artisanal guild structures. As a result, heritage documentation and craft preservation initiatives often prioritised crafts associated with material production such as weaving, pottery, metalwork, and wood carving, while the specialised knowledge involved in garment construction received comparatively little attention. This classification had long-term implications for the visibility of tailoring within craft discourse and heritage policy.

Another contributing factor relates to the institutional frameworks through which craft traditions have been documented and promoted in India. Many craft preservation initiatives, particularly during the twentieth century, focused primarily on handicrafts associated with decorative or material objects. Textile weaving, embroidery, dyeing, and metal crafts were extensively documented and supported through craft councils, artisan cooperatives, and government programmes. In contrast, tailoring, despite its reliance on sophisticated pattern drafting, garment engineering, and fabric manipulation was often perceived as a utilitarian occupation rather than a form of artisanal craftsmanship. Consequently, tailoring communities remained largely outside the institutional structures that shaped the recognition and promotion of traditional crafts.

Representation of India in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List

The limited recognition of tailoring traditions becomes particularly visible when viewed against the broader distribution of Indian elements inscribed on the intangible cultural heritage list maintained by UNESCO 2024. Although India has several elements included on this list, the majority belong to the domains of performing arts, ritual traditions, or social practices. Only a small number relate directly to traditional craftsmanship. This distribution suggests that craft-based knowledge systems, especially those associated with garment construction and tailoring, have remained comparatively marginal within formal heritage recognition frameworks (Smith 2006).

Table 2: Selected Countries and Number of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Elements

Country	Approximate Number of UNESCO ICH Elements
China	40+
Japan	20+
France	20+
South Korea	20+
India	~15

Note: Data compiled from the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists (UNESCO 2024).

Table 2 illustrates the variation in the number of intangible cultural heritage elements recognised across different countries. Nations such as China, Japan, France, and South Korea have actively nominated a wide range of cultural practices, including several traditions associated with craftsmanship and material culture (UNESCO 2003). Although India also possesses a diverse range of cultural traditions, its inscriptions are comparatively fewer and are largely concentrated in the domains of performing arts, ritual practices, and festivals. Craft traditions constitute only a small proportion of India's recognised elements, with the notable example being the brass and copper utensil-making tradition of the Thatheras of Jandiala Guru in Punjab (UNESCO 2014). The relative absence of garment construction or tailoring traditions from these heritage listings highlights a significant gap in the recognition of knowledge systems associated with clothing production. Given the long historical continuity of tailoring communities in India, this absence suggests that certain forms of craftsmanship, particularly those classified historically as service occupations, have remained outside the primary focus of heritage documentation, craft policy initiatives, and nomination processes (UNESCO 2022).

Structural Constraints in the Heritage Nomination Process

The process through which cultural practices are nominated for inscription on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list also shapes which traditions receive international recognition. Although UNESCO does not impose a limit on the total number of elements a country may possess, member states are generally able to submit only a limited number of nominations each year. Preparing a nomination requires extensive documentation, including historical evidence, community participation, and safeguarding plans. Consequently, national governments must prioritise certain traditions when deciding which practices to nominate for international recognition (UNESCO 2022).

In the Indian context, performing arts and festival traditions have historically received greater attention within these nomination processes. While these traditions represent vital aspects of India's cultural heritage, this emphasis has also meant that several craft traditions remain underrepresented within heritage inventories. Tailoring traditions, which involve specialised skills in measurement, pattern drafting, garment construction, and fitting, have rarely been considered within these nomination frameworks despite their historical significance and continued presence within hereditary occupational communities. This pattern suggests that the classification of tailoring as a service occupation rather than a craft tradition may have influenced its exclusion from heritage nomination priorities.

Recognising Tailoring as Traditional Craftsmanship

The preceding analysis suggests that ancestral tailoring traditions in India possess many of the characteristics commonly associated with recognised forms of traditional craftsmanship. Tailoring involves specialised technical knowledge, embodied manual skill, and systems of apprenticeship-based training that enable the transmission of expertise across generations. These characteristics correspond closely with the attributes identified within international frameworks for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, particularly within the domain of traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO 2003).

Traditional tailoring practices require a sophisticated understanding of measurement systems, pattern drafting, garment construction, and fabric behaviour. Skilled tailors are able to transform flat pieces of cloth into structured garments through techniques that involve cutting, shaping, stitching, and fitting. Much of this knowledge remains tacit, developed through long periods of observation, practice, and apprenticeship rather than through formal written documentation. Such forms of embodied knowledge transmission are widely recognised as defining features of craft traditions (Polanyi 1966).

Equally important is the role of hereditary tailoring communities in preserving these knowledge systems. In many regions of India, tailoring skills have historically been transmitted through family-based learning and workshop apprenticeships, often within occupational communities such as the Darzis. These systems of intergenerational transmission ensure the continuity of specialised garment construction techniques and reflect the community-based character that is central to many forms of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO. 2003).

Tailoring practices are also closely connected to regional clothing traditions and cultural identities. Garments such as the angarkha, sherwani, churidar, and other regionally significant forms of dress require specialised construction techniques developed through long-standing tailoring traditions. The ability to produce such garments reflects not only technical expertise but also familiarity with cultural norms of dress, social occasions, and aesthetic conventions. In this sense, tailoring functions not merely as a utilitarian activity but as a craft practice embedded within broader cultural systems.

Recognising tailoring within the domain of traditional craftsmanship would therefore represent a natural extension of existing heritage frameworks that seek to safeguard knowledge systems associated with craft production. By documenting and acknowledging the specialised skills of tailoring communities, heritage institutions can contribute to preserving an important dimension of India's clothing heritage while supporting the continued transmission of garment construction knowledge.

Such recognition could also open new opportunities for research, documentation, and skill preservation initiatives related to traditional tailoring practices. Incorporating tailoring traditions into broader discussions of craft heritage would help ensure that the technical expertise embedded within garment construction continues to be valued as part of India's rich and diverse cultural landscape.

Policy Implications for Craft Heritage Recognition:

The preceding analysis suggests that ancestral tailoring traditions possess many of the characteristics associated with recognised forms of traditional craftsmanship within intangible cultural heritage frameworks (UNESCO2003; UNESCO 2022). Recognising tailoring within such frameworks would contribute to a broader understanding of craft heritage that includes not only the production of material artefacts but also the specialised knowledge systems involved in garment construction. For cultural heritage institutions and policy makers, this perspective offers an opportunity to expand existing approaches to craft recognition in ways that acknowledge the technical expertise embedded within tailoring traditions.

One important implication concerns the documentation of traditional tailoring knowledge. Many tailoring techniques, including measurement systems, pattern drafting methods, and garment construction processes, have historically been transmitted through apprenticeship rather than formal written records. Systematic documentation initiatives could help preserve these knowledge systems while providing valuable resources for researchers, craft practitioners, and cultural institutions interested in clothing heritage.

A second area of potential policy engagement involves the inclusion of tailoring communities within existing craft support frameworks. Craft councils, heritage organisations, and cultural institutions have played an important role in preserving and promoting many traditional crafts in India. Extending similar recognition to hereditary tailoring communities could help highlight the cultural significance of garment construction traditions and encourage initiatives that support the transmission of tailoring skills across generations.

Skill transmission represents another important dimension of safeguarding craft heritage (Smith 2006). Apprenticeship-based learning has historically been central to the continuity of tailoring traditions. Policies that support training initiatives, community workshops, and craft education programmes could contribute to sustaining these knowledge systems while also creating opportunities for younger generations to engage with traditional garment construction techniques.

Finally, the recognition of tailoring as a form of traditional craftsmanship may also inform future heritage nomination initiatives (UNESCO 2022). As discussed earlier, the domain of traditional craftsmanship within the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage framework emphasises the safeguarding of knowledge and skills associated with craft production. Tailoring traditions, with their combination of technical expertise, apprenticeship-based transmission, and cultural embeddedness in clothing practices, align closely with these criteria. Exploring the potential inclusion of tailoring-related practices within national heritage inventories may therefore represent a constructive step toward recognising the broader cultural significance of garment construction traditions.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that acknowledging ancestral tailoring as part of India's craft heritage could contribute to a more inclusive understanding of traditional craftsmanship (Smith 2006). By recognising the specialised knowledge embedded within tailoring practices, cultural heritage policy can help ensure that the skills associated with garment construction remain valued and transmitted as part of India's living cultural traditions. Building on this perspective, the concluding section reflects on the broader implications of recognising tailoring within craft and heritage frameworks.

Conclusion

This study has examined the status of ancestral tailoring in India through the interrelated frameworks of craft practice and intangible cultural heritage. By analysing the technical, social, and cultural dimensions of tailoring, the paper has demonstrated that ancestral tailoring embodies the defining characteristics of traditional craftsmanship, including specialised knowledge systems, embodied manual skill, apprenticeship-based learning, and deep cultural embeddedness within clothing traditions. These attributes position tailoring alongside other recognised craft

practices that form part of intangible cultural heritage, thereby supporting the argument that garment construction knowledge constitutes a significant yet underacknowledged domain of cultural expertise.

The comparative analysis presented in this paper has further shown that tailoring and garment-making traditions in several international contexts are recognised as culturally significant forms of craftsmanship within heritage frameworks. In contrast, the relative absence of ancestral tailoring from institutional craft discourse and heritage recognition systems in India reflects historical patterns of classification, documentation priorities, and policy focus. This absence does not indicate a lack of craft value, but rather highlights the ways in which certain forms of knowledge, particularly those associated with service-based occupations have remained less visible within formal heritage frameworks.

Recognising ancestral tailoring as part of the domain of traditional craftsmanship offers an opportunity to broaden existing understandings of craft heritage in India. Such recognition would contribute not only to preserving specialised garment construction knowledge but also to acknowledging the role of hereditary tailoring communities in sustaining clothing traditions over time. From a policy perspective, the inclusion of tailoring within craft heritage frameworks may support initiatives related to documentation, skill transmission, and cultural preservation, while aligning with broader international approaches to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Ultimately, this study suggests that expanding the scope of craft recognition to include tailoring can contribute to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of India's cultural heritage. By foregrounding the knowledge systems embedded within garment construction practices, the paper invites further research, documentation, and policy engagement aimed at ensuring that ancestral tailoring traditions continue to be valued as part of the living heritage of the country.

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