

CONTENTS

Baba Lakhishah Banjara and Ethical Courage in Seventeenth-Century India — 1-11
Subaltern Agency, Religious Freedom, and the Making of Sikh Historical Memory

B. Suresh Lal

Global Fast Fashion Industry: Present Opportunities and Future Challenges for Sustainability 12-23

Omar Faisal, Haradhan Kumar Mohajan

Baba Lakhishah Banjara and Ethical Courage in Seventeenth-Century India — Subaltern Agency, Religious Freedom, and the Making of Sikh Historical Memory

B. Suresh Lal¹

¹ Professor of Economics & Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana, India

Correspondence: B. Suresh Lal, Professor of Economics & Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana, India.

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Abstract

Historiography of early modern India often prioritises emperors, saints, and institutions as central to religious conflict and tolerance. This focus overlooks how ordinary individuals' moral choices have shaped major events. This article centres on Baba Lakhishah Banjara, a 17th-century brave Naik from the Banjara merchant dynasty, and directly argues that his courageous actions in ensuring Guru Tegh Bahadur's dignified cremation after the Guru's 1675 execution under Mughal policy exemplify subaltern moral agency. These actions not only demonstrated civil courage but also profoundly influenced Sikh identity, intercommunal relations, and India's religious heritage. In total, this article advances historical discussions on resistance, religious freedom, and subaltern moral agency.

Keywords: Baba Lakhishah Banjara, Sikh martyrdom, Mughal India, civil courage, religious freedom, and subaltern history

1. Introduction

Religious freedom and moral duty are important themes in Indian history. The subcontinent has a long history of navigating diverse religious identities, from ancient systems valuing dharma to medieval meetings of faith groups. Scholars have focused on emperors, saints, and institutional leaders as principal agents shaping tolerance or repression. While these approaches highlight political and doctrinal advancements, they often obscure the moral interventions of ordinary individuals who maintained religious continuity under hardship.

India was a crossroads of imperial authority, religious diversity, and local moral norms during the Mughal Empire. Under Emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707), religious rules became more stringent, with the reintroduction of the jizya, legal orthodoxy, and closer supervision of religious leaders. Sikh history changed with the 1675 execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur—a pivotal moment for religious freedom, conscience, and moral sacrifice.

Sikh historiography has exhaustively analysed the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur; however, there has been comparatively less scholarly focus on the immediate responses following his execution. The Mughal government wouldn't let people cremate their bodies in public. This was not only an administrative action but also a symbolic one intended to obliterate collective memory and ritual dignity. (Bhai Lakhi Rai Banjara, 2025) Cremation is very important in Indian religious traditions because it means closure, reverence, and spiritual continuation. Preventing this rite further expanded political authority into moral and cultural domains. The Mughal Emperors' Religious Policy (Britannica, 2025).

At this time, Baba Lakhishah Banjara, the Banjara commercial group, intervened. He showed moral resistance by tearing down his house so the Guru's body could be burned. He accepted personal danger and loss, without

seeking public recognition or institutional help. His act preserved Sikh funeral traditions and ensured Guru Tegh Bahadur's death was remembered, not erased by government rules.

This article's central argument is that Baba Lakhishah Banjara's actions exemplify civil courage displayed by a non-elite, subaltern figure. Unlike acts of martyrdom or organised opposition, his nuanced and planned intervention was motivated by moral responsibility rather than political ambition. By analysing this event, the article challenges India's historical narratives focused on elite actors and underscores the significance of subaltern ethical action in preserving religious pluralism.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This article pursues three aims that reflect its core argument. First, it situates Baba Lakhishah Banjara's actions within the sociopolitical landscape of 17th-century Mughal India. Second, it shows how his deed embodies subaltern agency through the frameworks of moral resistance and civil courage. Third, it analyses how his act shaped Sikh communal memory, the formation of sacred spaces, and India's evolving moral history.

2. Review of Literature

Sikh historiography has thoroughly examined the life and martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, particularly with the defence of religious freedom. Foundational writings highlight the Guru's defiance of religious coercion and his advocacy for the rights of Kashmiri Pandits, interpreting his execution as a moral position rather than a political uprising (Grewal, 1998; Singh, 2004). These studies place martyrdom in the context of Sikh religious beliefs that stress conscience, sacrifice, and resisting injustice.

Much writing discusses doctrinal and institutional changes, especially Sikh identity under Guru Gobind Singh. There is little critical analysis of what happened after the execution, particularly logistical issues with cremation and memorialising the dead. Figures like Baba Lakhishah Banjara appear briefly, and their moral significance is not deeply explored. McLeod (2009) discusses Baba Lakhishah Banjara's role in the Guru's cremation and portrays the event as historically accurate, setting it apart from later devotional stories. Even yet, the focus is still on the Guru and not on the devotee's part in keeping the ceremony going.

Aurangzeb's rule is controversial among scholars. Early histories cast him as intolerant, while newer studies examine his governance and regional differences (Eaton, 2000). However, his policies prioritised religious compliance and imperial supremacy. Grewal (1998) puts Sikh-Mughal relations in context by saying that the Sikh Gurus were considered as more than just spiritual leaders; they were also seen as political and social leaders. The goal of Guru Tegh Bahadur's death was to quell dissent and show that the empire was strong. Grewal also talks about efforts to curb ritual commemoration, which shows that Mughal control went beyond the physical.

Mughal-centric historiography often frames resistance in binary terms—rebellion against submission—thus constraining the theoretical framework for covert ethical interventions exemplified by figures like Baba Lakhishah Banjara.

Subaltern Studies and Non-Elite Agency: The rise of subaltern studies was a turning point in South Asian historiography since it showed how marginalised populations had power. Guha and Chatterjee contend that history cannot be comprehended exclusively via elite activities; quotidian resistance and ethical decisions also influence social outcomes. Subaltern studies have primarily focused on peasant movements, colonial resistance, and nationalist politics, although their concepts are also relevant to the early modern period. Baba Lakhishah Banjara's involvement exemplifies subaltern moral agency—engagement beyond formal power structures, motivated by ethical conviction rather than political mobilisation.

Few studies examine Sikh history or early modern religious protest from the subaltern perspective. This gap necessitates reevaluating actions such as Baba Lakhishah's within a framework that acknowledges ethical conduct as historically relevant.

Philosophy and sociology define civil bravery as the ability to do the right thing when faced with injustice without using violence or trying to get attention. Civil disobedience is usually done by a group of people and is meant to be confrontational. Civil courage, on the other hand, is silent, situational, and personally costly. Employing this framework to analyse Indian history unveils novel insights. Baba Lakhishah Banjara's deeds show what this group stands for: moral clarity, discretion, and sacrificing for the greater good. His opposition did not directly oppose the Mughal state; however, it significantly undermined the state's efforts to obliterate religious memory.

This idea is supported by Indian philosophy, notably dharma. Ethical responsibility is frequently a personal obligation, independent of governmental authority. This is how Baba Lakhishah acts. **Sacred Space, Memory, and Institutionalisation:** Scholars of religious studies underline that sacred spaces are not merely passed down from one generation to the next; they are also created through historical action and memory. The change from a

cremation place to Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib is an example of this process. It began as a personal sacrifice and became a place for Sikhs to memorialise their loved ones.

Most of the current research on Sikh sacred geography focuses on how it relates to doctrine and pilgrimage networks. Nonetheless, the participation of non-elite players in the establishment of these locales remains under scrutiny. Recognising Baba Lakhishah Banjara's contribution deepens our understanding of the development of sacred institutions from ethical conduct rather than merely from formal authority.

Identified Research Gap: The evaluation of the literature reveals three significant shortcomings: There is insufficient focus on non-elite moral figures in Sikh and Mughal history. The civil courage framework is underutilised in early modern Indian history. Theoretical work on ritual preservation as resistance is lacking. This essay addresses these gaps by analysing Baba Lakhishah Banjara as a historical figure whose specific actions preserved religious traditions, shaped collective memory, and reinforced pluralism. The argument reinforces how subaltern agency and moral decisions contributed to these outcomes.

3. Results and Discussion of the Study

3.1 Theoretical Framework: Civil Courage, Dharma, and Moral Agency of the Subaltern

To understand the historical significance of Baba Lakhishah Banjara's involvement, it is necessary to utilise an analytical framework that goes beyond conventional binaries of resistance and surrender. Traditional historiography sometimes conflates resistance with overt revolt, protest, or martyrdom, thereby limiting the conceptual framework for suppressed, ethically motivated actions occurring outside official political movements. This study uses a theoretical framework from many fields that combines the ideas of civil courage, dharma-based ethical obligation, and subaltern moral agency to look at what Baba Lakhishah Banjara did.

3.1.1 Civil Courage as Ethical Action

Civil courage refers to morally driven actions undertaken by individuals who confront injustice or moral violations, despite personal risk, without the specific intention of garnering public recognition or fostering community mobilisation. Civil disobedience is typically organised, public, and confrontational, whereas civil courage is often private, contextual, and driven by an individual's conscience.

In political theory and sociology, civil bravery explains how people fight against authoritarian systems by doing everyday things that are morally right. These activities might not bring down governments directly, but they do make coercive power less moral. Baba Lakhishah Banjara's involvement fits this model nicely. His action did not directly challenge Mughal authority, nor did it involve extensive mobilisation. Instead, it coped with a specific moral crisis—the loss of ceremonial dignity—by making a planned personal sacrifice.

This difference is quite critical. By enabling the cremation of Guru Tegh Bahadur, Baba Lakhishah did not resist the state per se, but rather its attempts to control memory, ritual, and moral meaning. We can think of opposition as moral preservation instead of political confrontation when we have civil bravery.

3.1.2 Dharma and Moral Duty in Indian Thought

Indian philosophical traditions give us another way to think about Baba Lakhishah's actions. The concept of dharma, denoting moral duty grounded in moral order, has consistently emphasised that individual responsibility supersedes adherence to unjust authority. In classical, mediaeval, and early modern Indian philosophy, dharma is not something that needs to be approved by the government. Instead, it is a duty based on moral truth, social responsibility, and conscience.

From this point of view, Baba Lakhishah's participation could be considered a dharmic act. He put moral duty ahead of his own safety, losing money and putting his political career at risk. This duty was not just an idea; it was real: making sure people died with respect, keeping the ceremonies running, and standing up for the moral stand that Guru Tegh Bahadur took to safeguard religious freedom.

This dharmic framing also explains why the act wasn't violent or hostile. In this tradition, ethical responsibility excludes aggressiveness and control; it encompasses activities that align with moral truth, even when such efforts imply high costs.

3.1.3 Subaltern Moral Agency

Subaltern studies have emphasised that marginalised groups and individuals are not merely passive recipients of historical events but active participants who shape outcomes via everyday actions. While a considerable segment of this literature has focused on peasant movements and colonial resistance, its conceptual frameworks are also pertinent to early modern religious history. Baba Lakhishah Banjara shows how subaltern moral agency works, which is when a non-elite person does something morally just without being part of an institutional power structure. He was not a leader in religion or politics. His capacity to act derived not from his position, rank, or coercive authority, but from his ethical convictions and strategic acumen.

This is different from historical stories that centre on elites and give most of the power to kings, priests, or organised groups. This study highlights Baba Lakhishah's involvement, demonstrating that ethical action in Indian history frequently emerges in marginal social circumstances, particularly when institutional frameworks fail to maintain moral standards.

3.1.4 Putting the Framework Together

Civil bravery, dharma, and subaltern moral agency all work together to provide a strong framework for interpreting Baba Lakhishah Banjara's actions. It was more about values than politics, what he did. More about giving up something for yourself than protecting an institution. Not aggressive, but rather quiet and peaceful. Important in history, even though it was quiet. This framework allows us to go beyond hagiography and mythology, placing the experience within broad analytical discussions about resistance, ethics, and historical action.

3.2 Historical Context: Aurangzeb's India during the Mughal Era

3.2.1 The Mughal State in the 17th Century

The 17th century was the height of the Mughal Empire's power and the beginning of issues with its structure. (Decline of the Mughal Empire, 2021) The Mughal Empire was well-organised and owned a lot of land. It relied on a sophisticated structure to collect revenue, run the military, and present its beliefs as legitimate. (Britannica, 2025). Religious policy was a big part of this legitimacy since it affected how the state dealt with different religious groups.

During the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb, the Mughal state put more importance on Islamic legal principles and moral discipline. Even while there were still distinctions across regions and the administration was focused on getting things done, imperial rhetoric began to equate political power with religious allegiance more and more. This transformation had a big effect on communities where religious leaders had social power (Richards, 1993).

3.2.2 Aurangzeb's Religious Policy

Debates and Consensus: Historians are still fighting about what Aurangzeb's religious views were. Some people think that his policies were a break from the Mughal pluralism, while others think they were a continuation of how things had been done previously. Most experts agree on three points, even though they don't all agree on everything: More laws concerning how people can show their religion, especially for powerful groups (Bagga, 2006). More concern about allegiance and conflict, presented in terms of religion. Employing symbolic means (e.g., ritual constraints) to assert power. The reinstatement of jizya and the scrutiny of religious leaders were not merely economic or theological actions; they were administrative tools intended to strengthen imperial governance. (Richards, 1993)

3.2.3 Sikh–Mughal Relations Before 1675

The Sikh Gurus and the Mughal monarchy were no longer on good terms. In the past, interactions included living together and recognising each other. But by the middle of the 17th century, everyone in society knew about Sikh institutions. Gurus were more than just spiritual leaders; they also ran community life, which made them more visible to the imperial government.

Guru Tegh Bahadur was a moral authority because he travelled, taught, and campaigned for freedom of religion. He had an impact on more than just the Sikh community. This exposure made the empire suspicious, especially since religious opposition was seen as a sign of political instability at the time. (Nangia, 2025)

3.2.4 The Execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur

The execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur in Delhi in 1675 was a well-planned display of imperial power. It was designed to highlight what happens when you don't follow the state's religious standards. But the state didn't stop with the death sentence. People who tried to stop public cremation were more worried about controlling memory, symbolism, and moral interpretation. (Nangia, 2025)

In Indian religions, not being cremated is a serious moral failure. It takes away the dead person's dignity and keeps the community from remembering them together. The Mughal government tried to prohibit cremation so that they might have more political power in moral and cultural areas. (HistoryDiscussion.net., 2023).

3.2.5 Space, Surveillance, and Risk in Mughal Delhi

Delhi was the capital of the empire, and people were always watching what was going on there. People in the city were keeping an eye on religious events, especially those that were outside the law. Baba Lakhishah Banjara's decision to act in this situation made things far more dangerous. He set fire to his own house, which was not only a personal sacrifice but also a clever decision because of how Mughal power worked in that area. It took advantage of the lack of clarity in the administration without beginning a conflict, which showed that it was well aware of the political climate.

3.2.6 Historical Importance of the Context

This historical context reveals how crucial Baba Lakhishah Banjara's involvement was. His behaviour was not an isolated moral gesture but a deliberate response to a hostile political context. He made a moment that was meant to be forgotten into one that would last forever by keeping ceremonial dignity alive during a time of surveillance and repression.

3.3 *Baba Lakhishah Banjara's Intervention: Ritual Resistance and Doing the Right Thing*

3.3.1 The Moral Crisis After the Execution

The Sikh community was startled both politically and morally when Guru Tegh Bahadur was put to death in 1675. In Indian religious thought, funeral rituals, particularly cremation, are intrinsically associated with dignity, remembrance, and spiritual continuity. The Mughal state's purported attempt to hinder or restrict the public cremation of the Guru's remains represented an encroachment of political authority into the moral and ceremonial domain.

The Mughal Empire had these kinds of restrictions before; not letting people have burial ceremonies was a method to display control. The state tried to keep memory, interpretation, and meaning alive by taking care of the body after death. In this case, Sikh followers were attempting to find out how to react emotionally or theologically, as well as how to protect moral order when institutions were either hostile or too scared to act. Baba Lakhishah Banjara is an important historical figure at this time of moral decay.

3.3.2 The Act of Cremation as Historical Evidence

Critical Sikh historiography consistently records that Baba Lakhishah Banjara retrieved the Guru's body and arranged for its cremation by deliberately setting fire to his own residence, allowing the ritual to occur under the guise of an accidental blaze. The absence of this occurrence in Mughal administrative records is neither surprising nor methodologically problematic. Acts of secret resistance, especially those that remain undetected, are rare in official records.

The historical veracity of this incident is substantiated by its repeated appearance in independent Sikh historical narratives and by its validation by prominent historians such as Grewal (1998), McLeod (2009), and Singh (2004). These writers make an essential distinction between the main act—private cremation by self-sacrifice—and later devotional extensions. As a result, the focus remains on activities that have been historically verified, rather than on supernatural or symbolic claims.

3.3.3 Ritual Resistance: Conceptualising the Act

Baba Lakhishah Banjara's action can be analytically construed as ritual resistance—the preservation of religious practice as a kind of ethical disobedience. Ritual resistance works within the moral and cultural framework of a group, unlike physical insurrection or public protest. It doesn't seek to get rid of authority; it wants to stop authority from taking away meaning.

Baba Lakhishah battled against the Mughals' desire to make Guru Tegh Bahadur's death a show of punishment by making sure he was cremated. The ritual changed death into martyrdom, punishment into sacrifice, and coercion into moral testimony. In this way, cremation was a way to fight back against the might of the state. This difference is quite critical. The Mughal state could carry out executions, but it didn't have the ability to explain the moral consequences of doing so. Baba Lakhishah's action made sure that the meaning stayed with the Sikh community.

3.3.4 Personal Sacrifice and Risk Assessment

We need to look at Baba Lakhishah Banjara's sacrifice in terms of both money and people. He lived in a Banjara trading community, so he considered his home to be more than simply a place to live. It was also a location to keep items, a source of income, and a sign of stability. In the short term, it would have meant losing money straight away and being less safe in the long run. (Bhai Lakhi Rai Banjara, 2025) The risks were very significant, even higher than the chance of losing goods. If you help make a religious figure that was condemned, you might be considered as going against the emperor's orders, which could have you imprisoned or killed. So, the choice to act meant that the person was willing to take a big personal risk (Habib, 1999).

This risk assessment backs up the idea that Baba Lakhishah's actions were brave in a respectful way. He didn't do anything without thinking about it beforehand or to garner attention. He made a moral choice based on what he thought was right, even though he knew what would happen.

3.3.5 Silence, Discretion, and Strategic Action

An important feature of Baba Lakhishah Banjara's involvement is that he is quiet. There was no statement, protest, or organised action that went along with the deed. Not talking here wasn't giving up; it was a plan. Baba Lakhishah made sure the process succeeded by making the cremation look like an accident and decreasing the

risks of repression.

This decision sets ritual resistance apart from other types of resistance that historians usually talk about. It suggests that moral behaviour in authoritarian environments often operates through invisibility rather than direct confrontation. Silence helps to keep morals safe. These methods are historically important because they show how communities deal with tyranny not only via heroism and death, but also by planned, morally sound acts that stop oppression from getting worse.

3.3.6 Moral Motivation vs. Political Intent

It is important to separate Baba Lakhishah Banjara's moral motivation from political rebellion. There is no evidence that he acted to undermine Mughal authority or to incite coordinated insurrection. Instead, he stepped in because it was the appropriate thing to do: to maintain honour and dignity, to make sacrifices, and to keep ceremonies pure.

This distinction is crucial for the analysis. If you think of the act as a political uprising, you could not appreciate its moral grounding correctly. Baba Lakhishah's protest was not against the state itself, but against the moral violation of forbidding cremation. This type of action, based on morals, makes traditional conceptions of resistance more complicated and pushes historians to see moral obligation as a separate historical force.

3.3.7 The Shift from Private Action to Collective Memory

Baba Lakhishah's deed was private and clandestine, yet its repercussions were public and enduring. The successful cremation made it possible for the Sikh community to remember Guru Tegh Bahadur as a martyr instead of a victim who was silenced. Over time, this memory became part of the Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib, which was built on the site of the cremation. This transformation illustrates a big pattern in how history is remembered: private moral actions can have effects on public institutions. What began as a discreet initiative ultimately evolved into a significant element of the Sikh sacred landscape.

Sikh history does not overlook Baba Lakhishah's role in this. People remember what he did not as a heroic effort but as a moral service, which fits with the Sikh focus on humility and moral duty.

3.3.8 Ritual Resistance and Sikh Ethical Tradition

Baba Lakhishah Banjara's actions are very much in keeping with Sikh moral ideals, which stress seva (selfless service), sacrifice, and moral duty. In Sikh tradition, doing the right thing is more essential than possessing power. In this context, Baba Lakhishah's social marginality enhances, rather than diminishes, the ethical importance of his contribution.

His action also foreshadows later events in Sikh history, when opposition slowly combined moral conviction with disciplined action. Baba Lakhishah did not engage in militarised opposition; instead, his involvement contributed to the establishment of the moral ideals that subsequently defined Sikh identity.

3.3.9 Analytical Importance

From a historical point of view, Baba Lakhishah Banjara's involvement goes against a number of common ideas: That disagreement must be public to be historically significant. That moral action requires institutional authority. That ceremony is only a symbol and doesn't mean anything politically.

This research elucidates the operation of ethical action at the intersection of religion, culture, and power by highlighting ritual resistance. Baba Lakhishah's intervention did not alter Mughal policy; it significantly influenced Sikh history (HistoryDiscussion.net, 2023).

3.4 *Inter-Community Solidarity, Holy Space, and Institutional Memory*

3.4.1 From Private Sacrifice to Sacred Geography

Historical memory is preserved not just through writings and beliefs but also through spatial contexts. The transformation of the site of Guru Tegh Bahadur's cremation into Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib exemplifies how individual ethical efforts can establish an enduring sacred landscape. What began as a humble intervention, necessitated by political circumstances, ultimately evolved into one of the most significant Sikh temples in Delhi.

This alteration highlights a very crucial point: sacred places are not just passed down or declared; they are made through activities that give them meaning at a certain moment and place. In this case, the act of cremation, which was made possible by Baba Lakhishah Banjara's sacrifice, turned a moment of intended destruction into a place of remembrance. The spatialization of memory made sure that the moral meaning of sacrifice would persist beyond the political environment that tried to extinguish it.

3.4.2 Institutionalisation of Memory in Sikh Tradition

Institutional memory refers to the methods by which communities preserve, communicate, and formalise

historical meaning through established frameworks. Gurdwaras are places of prayer and a storehouse of historical knowledge in the Sikh religion. The establishment and subsequent recognition of Rakab Ganj Sahib incorporated the narrative of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom—and the ethical intervention that enabled its commemoration—into the institutional framework of Sikhism (Bagga, 2006).

Importantly, Sikh historical memory does not forget the contributions of people who were not part of the elite. The temple is largely about the Guru, but Sikh traditions about the place also show how important Baba Lakhishah Banjara is. This all-encompassing memory shows a complete Sikh moral framework that values seva (selfless service) and humility, recognising moral behaviour regardless of social or economic status. From a historiographical point of view, this goes against theories of institutional memory that prefer elite founders or doctrinal authorities. Instead, it shows how ordinary individuals can do bold things that help organisations develop.

3.4.3 Space, Power, and Counter-Memory

When looked at in the light of Mughal authority, the spatial aspect of Rakab Ganj Sahib becomes even more important. The shrine is near the imperial areas of Delhi and sits on property that has been closely observed and controlled in the past. Its existence is an example of what memory studies experts call “counter-memory,” which is a story that stays strong even when the government tries to erase it.

The Mughal empire tried to stop ceremonial remembering, but the Sikh community wrote memory into the city. This spatial inscription altered the dynamics of power: the state could momentarily govern bodies, although it could never permanently dictate meaning. Sacred space became a way for people to keep up their moral opposition over time.

3.4.4 Inter-Community Solidarity as Lived Practice

Baba Lakhishah Banjara's action is an example of ethical solidarity between communities, and it is vital for Sikhs to remember. As a member of the Banjara trading community, which is made up of people from many socioeconomic classes and jobs, he backed a Sikh religious leader without being told to do so by the government or the community. This action shows a practical pluralism based on shared moral values instead of official alliances.

There are many examples throughout Indian history of different groups working together, but these stories are usually eclipsed by ones that centre on conflict or separation. These stories get deeper when Baba Lakhishah's account shows that moral duty often went beyond community lines, especially when things were tough. This unity was not just an idea or a speech; it was shown by real sacrifice. Baba Lakhishah placed his life and property on the line to show that he believed in fairness and dignity that extended across social and religious barriers.

3.4.5 The Banjaras and Ethical Networks

The Banjara people have always been a collection of individuals who moved around and traded with people from different places, cultures, and social groups. This movement made it easier for people to depend on each other in practical ways and build ethical networks that elite chroniclers often missed. (Chavhan, 2023) Baba Lakhishah's involvement can be understood in the larger context of relational ethics, which are shaped by things like mobility, exchange, and shared vulnerability. Such networks were very important in cities like Delhi, where different groups of people met every day under the watchful eye of imperial power. In this scenario, behaving ethically was not just a personal choice; it was also a part of relationships in society that valued trust, giving back, and moral duty.

3.4.6 Ritual, Memory, and Group Identity

Ritual is an important aspect of how a group sees itself. Baba Lakhishah made sure that Guru Tegh Bahadur's sacrifice would be fulfilled in a traditional way by permitting him to be cremated. This would have lasting meaning for the whole society. Without ritual closure, martyrdom can turn into an unresolved trauma. With ritual, it becomes a way to teach morals and build identity. The following institutionalisation of memory at Rakab Ganj Sahib made this process stronger. Pilgrimage, storytelling, and group worship keep the site's moral lesson alive: that sacrifice and service, not coercion, defend religious freedom and dignity (Bayly, 1988).

3.4.7 Pluralism Beyond Policy

A lot of scholarly material about pluralism is about how the government works, like laws, decrees, and how things are done. These things are significant, but Baba Lakhishah Banjara's biography exposes another side: pluralism as a moral way of life. His decision was not predicated on legal protection or imperial leniency; it arose from a moral conviction expressed in difficult circumstances. The difference between these two things has a big effect on how we think about plurality in Indian history. This story shows that pluralism has been kept alive from the bottom up by everyday acts of bravery, solidarity, and moral duty, rather than being seen as a top-down

system.

3.4.8 The Lasting Importance of Sacred Space

The continuous importance of Rakab Ganj Sahib in modern Sikh life shows how powerful ethical memory can be when it is based in space. People can pray, learn about history, and think about morality at the memorial. It reminds individuals that their dignity often depends on the courage of those who undertake things without expecting praise or recompense. The site tells a moral story about the lives of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Baba Lakhishah Banjara, focusing on both martyrdom and moral duty.

3.4.9 Analytical Implications

This section presents three points about analysis: Ethical behaviours, not only religious rules, have historically established sacred areas. Institutional memory can protect the agency of marginalised groups by challenging historical narratives that focus on the elite. Inter-community collaboration is an essential element of India's pluralistic tradition, expressed through lived experience rather than merely via policy. These claims support the main point of the article, which is that the moral fortitude of regular people has had a big impact on India's religious and moral framework (Bagga, 2006).

3.5 *Comparative Points of View, Modern Importance, and Discourse*

3.5.1 Comparative Perspectives on Ethical Resistance in Indian History

Historical narratives of resistance in India have primarily focused on explicit, organised, and typically confrontational expressions of dissent—rebellions, reform movements, and mass mobilisations. These forms are significant, but they are only one part of a bigger picture of ethical behaviours. Baba Lakhishah Banjara's involvement invites a juxtaposition with alternative forms of resistance that operate discreetly yet successfully within constrained political environments.

3.5.1.1 Martyrdom vs. Ethical Facilitation

There is a big difference between martyrdom and ethical facilitation. Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom was public, morally strong, and centred on protecting religious freedom. Baba Lakhishah Banjara's action was more useful than spectacular when compared to others. He did not explicitly confront the Mughal state; instead, he upheld the moral meaning of martyrdom by fulfilling the ceremonies. This difference has an effect on linear narratives that only give historical importance to people who suffer in public. Ethical facilitators, or people who value dignity, memory, and continuity, are just as important in shaping historical events. Without Baba Lakhishah's help, the martyrdom might have been cut short in a ritualistic way and made less powerful. So, ethical facilitation is a way to fight back that works with martyrdom instead of against it.

3.5.1.2 Quiet Resistance and Moral Efficacy

Indian history offers further instances of quiet resistance where moral efficacy transcended political significance. For example, Bhakti traditions frequently stress transforming oneself and becoming more virtuous rather than questioning institutions. Many everyday acts of resistance during colonial authority, such as keeping indigenous languages and traditions alive, also happened without being formally recognised. People like Mahatma Gandhi pushed for mass civil disobedience as a moral way to act, yet even in Gandhian practice, small acts of conscience were still very important. Baba Lakhishah Banjara's deeds presage a broader Indian tradition wherein moral clarity, rather than violence, constitutes the principal mode of opposition.

3.5.1.3 Comparative Global Perspectives

Baba Lakhishah's intervention is consistent with academic discussions regarding ethical behaviour in authoritarian settings. Studies on twentieth-century Europe illustrate how individuals protected persecuted communities by providing shelter, safeguarding cultural artefacts, and facilitating respectful burials, frequently at significant personal peril. These actions didn't change state policy much; instead, they protected moral order and historical remembrance. When you look at it this way, Baba Lakhishah Banjara's work places Indian history in a world framework. When official institutions don't follow moral rules, people usually step in to fill the gap. This comparison highlights how vital it has been for people to be brave in the face of danger throughout history.

3.5.2 The Contemporary Importance of Baba Lakhishah Banjara's Moral Behaviour

3.5.2.1 Religious Freedom Beyond Legal Frameworks

In modern discussions regarding religious freedom, the focus is usually on constitutional safeguards, legal protections, and state policies. These frameworks are crucial, but Baba Lakhishah Banjara's story demonstrates another important side: carrying out your morals through religious freedom. His involvement wasn't based on legal protections or institutional backing; it was based on a moral obligation that showed itself in difficult situations.

This point of view is very essential in regions where the law isn't very strong, is slow, or is only followed in some instances. Baba Lakhishah's actions teach us that we often have to take responsibility for our own actions in order to keep our dignity and freedom, especially when institutions fail.

3.5.2.2 Civil Courage in Today's World

The principle of civil courage is still very essential today. In cultures where there is a lot of division, monitoring, and social pressure, ethical behaviour is becoming more and more subtle. People who report wrongdoing, work for humanitarian groups, or help settle disputes in their communities often do so without getting any credit. They do it because they think it's the right thing to do, not because they want to get something in return. The life of Baba Lakhishah Banjara is an example from history of what to do. His willingness to make personal sacrifices for the sake of dignity shows that civil bravery does not depend on charm, power, or public approval. Instead, it depends on having strong morals and being willing to do something when those morals are at risk.

3.5.2.3 Plurality as an Ethical Practice

Current discourse on plurality frequently frames it as a matter of policy development or institutional adjustment. Baba Lakhishah's involvement signifies a deeper foundation: pluralism as ethical solidarity manifested in practice. His actions went above what was acceptable in both religious and work settings, suggesting that he had moral beliefs rather than loyalty to a group. This comprehension bears profound consequences for contemporary multicultural societies. It suggests that lasting pluralism depends not only on formal frameworks but also on everyday ethical obligations that recognise dignity within variety.

3.5.3 Discussion: Integrating Ethics, History, and Memory

3.5.3.1 Putting Resistance in a New Light in Indian History

The case of Baba Lakhishah Banjara shows that resistance needs to be seen in a new light in Indian history. It doesn't have to be loud or unified for resistance to have a difference. People's ethical activities, especially those that don't fit into elite frameworks, can change the course of history by protecting meaning, memory, and dignity. This new concept challenges the historical patterns that associate significance with size or popularity. It calls for more attention to the micro-ethics of history, which are the decisions people make when moral order is at risk.

3.5.3.2 Ritual as a Site of Power and Resistance

The analysis also underscores ritual as a crucial centre of power. The Mughal state tried to control not only bodies but also moral views by trying to make cremation illegal. Baba Lakhishah's intervention disrupted this control by reinstating ritual as a domain of communal authority. This understanding goes beyond Sikh history. In all cultures, rituals that have to do with death, memory, and grief are profoundly political. They change how individuals in a community think about pain and give it moral weight. Keeping rituals intact is a strong way to stand up to oppressive control.

3.5.3.3 Memory, Space, and Ethical Continuity

The institutionalisation of memory at Rakab Ganj Sahib illustrates how ethical activities achieve persistence through spatial inscription. A holy sanctuary keeps moral lessons alive for generations, passing on their importance. In this case, the area has a double legacy: the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur and the bravery of Baba Lakhishah Banjara in the civil war. This contradiction makes the main thesis of the piece stronger: ethical history is formed when powerful people give up something and less powerful people help. Both are necessary for moral continuity.

3.5.4 Synthesis of Findings

The analysis above shows that there are a few essential things we learnt: Civil bravery is a unique and historically important way to resist that doesn't involve direct confrontation. Subaltern actors are very important for sustaining religious freedom, especially when institutions fail or back down. Rituals are an important part of remembering the past because they bring together power and morality. Pluralism in Indian history has been sustained by experienced ethical solidarity, rather than only through state policy or elite leadership. These results add to larger discussions in history, sociology, and religious studies by giving us a better idea of how moral agency affects community life.

Baba Lakhishah Banjara's participation is an important reminder that history is shaped by both rulers and people who disagree with them. People who act quietly, decisively, and ethically when moral ideals are in peril also shape them. His action preserved dignity in death, fostered communal remembrance, and reinforced a lasting multicultural moral legacy.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This article examines Baba Lakhishah Banjara's historical significance by situating his actions within the moral,

political, and cultural framework of Mughal India in the 1600s. The research departed from elite-focused historical accounts, emphasising a non-elite individual whose ethical involvement profoundly impacted religious continuity, collective memory, and the pragmatic implementation of pluralism.

In 1675, the killing of Guru Tegh Bahadur was a very significant act of compulsion. It was intended to penalise dissent and to diminish the significance of rituals and historical memory. The Mughal dynasty sought to prohibit cremation to consolidate its authority over moral and symbolic matters. Baba Lakhishah Banjara's response to this problem indicates that ethical agency can remain effective even under intense scrutiny and persecution. He kept Sikh burial customs alive by helping with the cremation and making a personal sacrifice. He also ensured that martyrdom was remembered as a moral legacy rather than erased from the records.

The analysis presented three principal arguments. First, it proved that civil courage is a distinctive and historically significant type of opposition. Civil bravery differs from rebellion or public protest, as it involves discreet, morally inspired actions undertaken at one's own expense. Baba Lakhishah's participation exemplifies this mode of resistance, illustrating how moral obligation can be fulfilled in the absence of institutional authority or political aspiration.

Second, the study highlighted the importance of subaltern moral agency in Indian history. Baba Lakhishah Banjara was not a religious or political leader; he could only do what he thought was right. The essay challenged the historical writing tradition that equates historical significance with elite status or fame by foregrounding his participation. It showed that ethical breakdowns often occur because of the actions of ordinary people who step in when organisations fail to uphold moral standards.

Third, the article illustrated how sacred locations and rituals can serve as sites of resistance and memory. The fact that the cremation location became Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib indicates that private moral actions can have long-lasting effects on institutions and places. In this context, sacred space functions as a medium for maintaining ethical value through generations, resisting attempts at symbolic dominion.

The tale of Baba Lakhishah Banjara holds historical relevance and broader implications for understanding religious freedom and pluralism. The research indicated that pluralism in Indian history has not been sustained solely by imperial policy or constitutional structures, but rather by ethical solidarity expressed during periods of stress. Baba Lakhishah's participation transcended ethnic and occupational divides, highlighting dignity as a collective moral principle rather than a sectarian assertion. This historical example remains significant in contemporary society, when there is considerable division and institutions are weak. It reminds us that standing up for our rights and dignity often requires moral strength and acting independently without expecting praise. Historians may create more complete and inclusive narratives about how ethical traditions endure over time by identifying and studying such events (Bayly, 1988).

Ultimately, Baba Lakhishah Banjara's importance in Indian history lies not in his political power or in his contributions to religious thought, but in his moral conduct during a period of profound moral upheaval. His life shows that rulers and saints have not been the only ones who have shaped India's religious freedom, pluralism, and moral continuity. Recognising these contributions is essential for a thorough comprehension of India's historical and ethical heritage.

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Global Fast Fashion Industry: Present Opportunities and Future Challenges for Sustainability

Omar Faisal¹ & Haradhan Kumar Mohajan²

¹ Fashion Design & Technology, Premier University, Chittagong, Bangladesh

² Chairman and Associate Professor, Department of Mathematics, Premier University, Chittagong, Bangladesh

Correspondence: Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, Chairman and Associate Professor, Department of Mathematics, Premier University, Chittagong, Bangladesh.

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Abstract

Fast fashion is a business model that has profoundly changed the fashion industry by creating an efficient supply chain for the rapid production of fashionable merchandise. It has revolutionized in clothing industry with the fulfillment of consumer demand through the development of new styles. On the other hand, it produces a large quantity of harmful raw materials, as well as roughly emits 8-10% of global carbon dioxide (CO₂), and disposes excess untreated water and microplastics. The garment workers in this sector are victims of various oppressions, such as low-wages, unhealthy working conditions, and endemic labor injustices. For sustainability, it requires not only technological innovations but also some systemic changes in policies, business practices and consumer behavior to make sure the production is both socially fair and environmentally responsible. This study explores environmental and social implications of fast fashion based on circular economy and environmental justice.

Keywords: fast fashion, circular economy, environmental justice, sustainability, labor rights, microplastic pollution

1. Introduction

Fast fashion is the highly profitable global industry that produces mass amount of cheap and low-quality clothes and accessories very rapidly (Turker & Altuntas, 2014). It is characterized by the rapid production of inexpensive clothing to meet ever-changing trends that has become a dominant force in the global fashion industry (Taplin, 2014). It is a massive, global economic sector, encompassing multiple stages of sourcing and manufacturing from fiber and yarn production to dyeing, printing, cutting, sewing, and quality control (Thomas et al., 2024). Zara, H&Ms, Fashion Nova, Primark, and Shein are well-known companies of fast fashion industry. The Zara has demonstrated that it produces 840 million garments each year for its 6,000 stores worldwide (Ferdows et al., 2005). Every year, more than 100-150 billion pieces of garments are produced globally. Global fast fashion has doubled production over the decades where more than 50% of apparel is thrown away within a year (Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, 2022).

Fast fashion is the fourth-largest user of raw materials and water. Climate influence of it is very terrible. For example, its carbon footprint is roughly 8-10% of global emissions (4-5 billion tons of CO₂ annually), it consumes an awful 215 trillion liters of water per year, and it creates a huge amount of plastic garbage, and 500,000 tons of microplastic fibers dumped into oceans (Jacometti, 2019). Globally about 92 million tons of textile wastes are accumulated at different phases of their life cycles, and only 20% of this waste is collected for reuse and recycling, and more than 80% of clothing waste is discarded in landfills for dumping and incineration that lead to higher carbon footprint, and energy and raw material losses (Gupta et al., 2022).

The fast fashion has undertaken numerous efforts to meet the demand for sustainability, such as launch of

eco-friendly products, transparent supply chain, reduction of environmental consequences, recycling, reuse, and manufacture of new waste-based products (Kim et al., 2021). Although there are relevant technological solutions, such as effluent treatment plants and waterless dyeing methods; and these are largely underutilized due to a lack of financial resources and relevant regulations (Gonçalves et al., 2025). The fast fashion workers face desperate social and ethical implications. For example, frequently they have to deal with deplorable exploitation, sexism, and unhealthy working conditions (Leslie et al., 2014). This article contributes to the academic and policy discourse on sustainable fashion by integrating environmental and social dimensions within a unified analytical framework (Kottala, 2021).

2. Literature Review

A literature review is a survey and critical evaluation of existing scholarly works, such as books, articles, theses, and any other source relevant to a particular issue and research area on a specific topic (Creswell, 2013). It aims to summarize, synthesize, and identify gaps in the existing knowledge to provide context for new research. A good literature review has a proper research question, a proper theoretical framework, and a chosen research methodology (Baglione, 2012). It is the most influential work around any topic by type, area, and time. It is an essential part of biology and health sciences, business, economics, finance, computer science, and natural sciences (Dellinger et al., 2007). It demonstrates the ability to research and expertise on a chosen topic of research. It provides an overview of sources, and the researcher has used in researching a particular topic and to demonstrate the readers how the researcher fits within existing scholarship about the topic. The five C's to write a literature review are cite, compare, contrast, critique, and connect (Galvan, 2015). In the social and behavioral sciences, it has an organizational pattern that combines both summary and synthesis, often within specific conceptual categories (Cooper, 1998; Mohajan, 2020b). Types of literature review are argumentative review, exploratory review, integrative review, historical review, methodological review, meta-narrative review, systematic review, problematizing review, theoretical review, etc. (George et al., 2023).

David Schlosberg has examined how environmental and ecological justice is used in both self-described environmental justice movements and in theories of environmental and ecological justice. He has stressed that the goal of it is the development of a broad, multi-faceted, yet integrated notion of justice that can be applied to both relations regarding environmental risks in human populations and relations between human communities and non-human nature (Schlosberg, 2007). Rijajul Haq Tanjil and his coworkers have indicated that microplastics are increasing in environment, which creates pervasive environmental pollutant, with their presence extending to the atmosphere in urban, suburban, and even remote locations; and become substantial health risks. In their study they have used fluorescent microscopy and Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy to identify transparent and black microplastics, predominantly synthetic textile fibers with lengths ranging from 20 to 180 μm . They have revealed that polyester, nylon, regenerated cellulose, and natural fibers are observed in the atmosphere. Their study provides compelling evidence implicating the textile factory as a noteworthy source of atmospheric microplastic pollution to reduce environmental contamination and protect the health of the employed in textile production plants (Tanjil et al., 2025).

Cagri Bulut and his coauthors have wanted to demonstrate how greenwashing perceptions shape the effects of environmental concern on post-millennials purchasing behavior and intentions toward green and recycled products. They have observed that greenwashing perception decreases the effects of environmental concern on green behavior. They have also demonstrated that greenwashing awareness has a critical role in creating a purchasing behavior of post-millennials that have environmental concerns (Bulut et al., 2021). Muhammed Zakir Hossain and his coauthors have investigated the influence of greenwashing on consumer trust and brand loyalty, emphasizing the variations of these relationships across diverse industries. Their study enhances comprehension of greenwashing impact on consumer behavior and offers practical insights for businesses in sustainability focused sectors (Hossain et al., 2025). Valentina Jacometti and her coworkers have realized that the fashion industry is a sector with a high environmental impact. It involves a very long and complicated supply chain that is associated with large consumption of water and energy, use of chemical substances, water and air pollution, waste production and finally microplastic generation. They have stressed that waste prevention throughout the product life cycle and minimizing waste that ends up in incinerators or landfills, which are two key elements for the fashion industry's transition to circular economy (CE) (Jacometti, 2019).

3. Research Methodology

Research is the careful consideration of a study regarding a particular concern using scientific methods (Mohajan, 2018b). It is the creation of new knowledge and the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way to generate new concepts, methodologies, and understandings (Turker & Altuntas, 2014). It is a systematic inquiry to describe, explain, predict, and control the observed phenomenon. The true goal of it is to seek answers on previously unanswered questions for contributing to the body of knowledge in a discipline (Goddard & Melville, 2004). Methodology is defined as the systematic method to resolve a research problem through data

gathering using various techniques (Murthy & Bhojanna, 2009). It is a set of principles and ideas that inform the design of a research study (Birks & Mills, 2011). Main types of methodologies are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods. Research methodology is the systematic plan, techniques, and procedures used to collect, analyze, and interpret data to answer research questions, ensuring validity and reliability (Ghayas, 2022; Mohajan, 2017).

This study is based on reliable secondary data sources that are derived from top rated academic and institutional papers published in peer-reviewed journals, books of renowned authors, theses, and project report on cleaner and sustainable production and consumption, and new fashions (Dellinger et al., 2007; Mohajan, 2018b). The study applies a qualitative research design to explore environmental and social facets of the fast fashion industry scope the circular economy (CE) and environmental justice (EJ). We have stressed on life-cycle assessments, carbon footprints, water resource usage, and microplastic emissions to obtain information on labor rights, and transparency for sustainable production and consumption (Turker & Altuntas, 2014). The study also discusses environmental pollution, human exploitation, and sustainable development patterns by interpreting meanings in social contexts (Hossain et al., 2025).

4. Objective of the Study

The fast fashion is characterized by rapidly producing, cheap clothing, and copying runway styles, which is quickly storable (Mathew & Spinelli, 2025). It prioritizes speed, affordability, and constant turnover of inventory. It often makes with low-quality materials and is designed to be worn briefly before being discarded. It has seen some extraordinary shifts over the last three decades that has a significant environmental impact. It is the second-biggest consumer of water and is responsible for about 10% of global carbon emissions (Papamichael et al., 2023). It generates about 92 million tons of textile waste each year. All these factors have led to the destruction of the environment, chemical contamination of water, and pollution of the living space in the regions of production (Priyadharshini et al., 2024). The main objective of this study is to understand the actual environmental and social effects of the current fast fashion industry and how the implementation of the concepts of circular economy and environmental justice could provide a solid base for decision of future making and development (Turker & Altuntas, 2014; Mohajan, 2018a). The minor objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1) to identify the key environmental impacts of fast fashion across production, consumption, and disposal stages,
- 2) to examine how supply chain structures contribute to labor exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and gender inequality,
- 3) to assess the effectiveness of circular strategies, such as recycling, resale, rental, and closed-loop production in reducing environmental burdens, and
- 4) to analyze the roles of policy, corporate accountability, and consumer behavior in facilitating systemic sustainability transitions.

5. Overview of the Fast Fashion Industry

Fast fashion is a design, manufacturing, and marketing method that focuses on rapidly and cheaply producing trendy, mass-market clothing that mimics high-fashion designs, leading to constant new styles at low prices but is creating significant environmental issues (Dewey & Nahoum, 2025). It has grown during the late 20th century when manufacturing of clothing becomes less expensive due to more efficient supply chains, new quick response manufacturing methods, and greater reliance on low-cost labor from the apparel manufacturing industries of South, Southeast, and East Asia, where women make up 85-90% of the garment workforce (Anjum, 2024). It is estimated that it represents more than 2% of the global GDP that is a sum of \$3 trillion (Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020).

The term “fast fashion” was coined by the New York Times and was first used at the beginning of the 1990s, when Zara landed in New York (Nguyen, 2023). It refers to low-cost, trendy clothing that rapidly transitions from design to retail for meeting consumer demand. It has revolutionized the global textile and apparel industry through its primacy of fast delivery of affordable goods to the masses (Bhattacharjee, 2018). The fast fashion clothing generation has doubled in the early 2000s, whereas the average lifespan has halved. The model is developed into the driver of global economic growth and a symbol of sustainability problems in production and consumption. The global textiles industry is a major carbon polluter, and it is expected that the industry can grow up to 63% by 2030 (EC, 2022). Significant companies in fast fashion are Fashion Nova, Primark, UNIQLO, Forever 21, H&Ms, Shein, and Zara (Monroe, 2021). Labor practices in fast fashion are often exploitative due to the gender concentration of the garment industry, and women are more vulnerable (Whabi, 2020).

5.1 Production Stage

The fast fashion production refers to the workflow of creating apparel, from initial concept development to retail

distribution. It is preceded in multiple stages, such as design, sourcing, pattern making, sewing, finishing, and distribution (Tokatli & Kızılgün, 2009). At the starting the designers analyze fashion trends, consumer preferences, and seasonal demands, and then choose textiles based on quality, sustainability, and cost. Bulk fabric is cut, stitched, and assembled in factories; and garments undergo inspection for defects, finishing, and labeling. The final products are packaged, tagged, and shipped to the customers (Bumin & Bumin, 2024).

The employment land in this sector is extremely exploitative and unequal, and it seems to be the least developed in either material or energy efficiency (Palacios-Marín & Tausif, 2022). The sector is over-reliance on virgin resources, including cotton and polyester textiles and chemical dyes, perpetuates an economy where wastes and pollutions are irrevocable byproducts using up non-renewable resources (Kirchherr et al., 2017). The textile industry accounts for fresh water pollution that produces 20% of global wastewater and 10% of global CO₂ emissions (EMF, 2023). For the production of sustainable garments, we should set specific goals for the use of recycled materials and other new types of fibers, such as recycling of cotton and the production of recycled polyester and nylon with the use of chemicals and plant-based fibers for making new textiles (Leonas, 2017). Brands and producers have a substantial influence on creating products that can be reused or have a second life from the beginning of the design process (Zikopoulos, 2022).

5.2 Consumption Stage

The consumption stage of fast fashion enables to discover the breakdown between sustainability awareness and purchasing practices. Although the consumers know that fast fashion does environmental harms but they are continued to buy fast fashion due to conceptions of affordability, accessibility, and aesthetics (Mathew & Spinelli, 2025). At the consumer level, the awareness of negative impacts is insufficient. Therefore, the effective transformation requires in behavioral, cultural, and systemic interventions. Education campaigns should focus on value longevity, ethical fashion narratives, and the social costs of cheap consumption (Jimenez-Fernande et al., 2023). Affordable sustainable options, such as resale, rental, and repair initiatives must be accessible to lower-income consumers. Collective action movements can enhance consumer empowerment and policy advocacy. This multilevel strategy recognizes that sustainability must emerge from a shared moral economy, where each stakeholder contributes equitably to reform (Ozturkcan, 2024). This evidence points to the attitude and behavior gap provide that consumer decisions are predicated on some factors, such as lack of income, traditional image consciousness, and market availability instead of values (Perry & Chung, 2016).

The consumption is furthermore connected to the serious issue of the disconnection between consumption motivations and behaviors. The sustainable economy (SE) and circular economy (CE) conceptualize fast fashion consumption as low durability and short life span, which is even shorter due to the fashion novelties (Niinimäki et al., 2020). It fits well the overall study literature that emphasizes the significant gap between the consumers' knowledge and values, and their actual behavior. At present the global consumers purchase an estimated 61.7 million tons of apparel annually, and this number is projected to reach 101.6 million tons by 2030 (Jackson & Shaw, 2008). From a CE perspective, The RealReal, Rent the Runway, and Patagonia's Worn Wear show that there is a significant opportunity to build CE-driven business models that emphasize reselling, leasing, and repairing clothing. However, environmental justice (EJ) offers a different view on the consumption issue, and conceptualizing it as a moral geography (Okur & Saricam, 2025).

5.3 End-of-Life Stage

End-of-life management represents one of the most neglected components of fast fashion sustainability. Less than 1% of the fast fashion clothes are recycled to make new clothing. Some clothes are ended up downcycled into low-valued materials, such as mattress stuffing, offshored, etc., and the rest is disposed in incinerators and landfills that release methane and other harmful poisonous chemicals (Moorhouse, 2020). In least developed countries, waste sites and informal recycling sectors are unregulated and expose local communities to hazardous materials. More than 92 million tons of fast fashion wastes are incinerated or exported as second-hand waste to the developing countries (Somasekaran et al., 2025).

Recently, several NGOs have startups piloted upcycling and fiber recovery projects, but these remain underfunded and small-scale (Palacios-Marín & Tausif, 2022). These findings suggest that technical pathways to circularity are feasible, but their implementation necessitates systemic alignment among manufacturers, policy-makers, and consumers (EC, 2023). The Fiber-to-Fiber process is challenging due to mixed-material compositions of most textiles, lack of sorting infrastructure, and poor product traceability. The effective CE transition should contain EJ safeguards, such as fair trade recycling networks, and circular design principles that would ensure that end-of-life burdens are not offshored to vulnerable regions (Omio, 2024).

6. Sustainability Practices in Fast Fashion

Recently global production and consumption of fast fashion have increased due to the rising of global population and increased economic development (Mathew & Spinelli, 2025). As a result, environmental pollution is

increasing alarmingly (Mohajan, 2021b). At present the sustainability in the fashion industry is often approached from integrated environmental, economic, and social frameworks; reflecting the multi-layered nature of numerous sustainability problems in fast fashion. Circular fashion aims to create a closed loop system, reducing waste and maximizing the lifespan of clothing and textiles (Priyadharshini et al., 2024). Circular economy (CE) and environmental justice (EJ) are two of the most suitable frameworks to comprehend the complex fast fashion sustainability phenomena (de la Motte & Ostlund, 2022).

6.1 Circular Economy (CE)

In linear economy (LE), outputs are produced from raw materials, and then are sold, and used; and ultimately incinerated or discarded as waste. Therefore, it follows “*take, make, use, waste, and throwaway*” policy (Hora et al., 2023). Hence, LE only contains the steps of production, consumption and disposal (Mohajan, 2021a). Unsustainable side effects of LE in the global environment are loss of biodiversity, deforestation, environment pollution, climate change, etc. (Preston, 2012). The circular economy (CE) is an alternative to the traditional LE that indicates how to turn waste into a resource and brings it back into the economic cycle. It optimizes the products and minimizes the wastes (EMF, 2013). It substantially can reduce the environmental pollution. It is an economic system that rethinks to use raw materials and resources for the creation of a sustainable economy; free of waste and emissions (Mohajan, 2021b). It converts the waste into valuable resources in the economy. The CE mainly emerges from 3R’s principles: Reduction, Reuse, and Recycle (Preston, 2012). According to CE “*nothing is lost, everything is transformed*” (Alexandru & Taşnadi, 2014).

In the context of fashion, CE posits itself on the importance of prolonging product usage by means of reuse, repair, recycling, and re-manufacturing (Mohajan, 2020a). The Ellen MacArthur Foundation contends that CE privileges three main principles: designing out waste, keeping materials in use, and regenerating natural systems (EMF, 2013). If enacted properly, these principles can lead to a substantial reduction in the environmental footprint of apparel production. Some of the key CEs in the fashion industry are as follows (Mohajan, 2020b):

- i) Recycling and upcycling that are necessary for the fabrication into new garments to retain the material value of the end product. At present the upcycling technique is also gaining popularity as customers’ concerns about sustainability issues are rising in recent days (Wang et al., 2020).
- ii) Second-hand and resale markets that are prolonging the lifespan of garments by entering back into reuse markets (Gazzola et al., 2020).
- iii) Rental and sharing models that are reducing the overall quantity of goods from owners to users (Jacometti, 2019).
- iv) Closed-loop production that is designing apparel for disassembly and reassembly into the value chain (Mohajan, 2021c).

Despite their potential, CE initiatives remain marginal within the global industry. Studies highlight scalability challenges due to technological limitations, inconsistent regulatory support, and consumer reluctance to adopt circular behaviors (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

6.2 Environmental Impacts

At present the textile dyeing and finishing account for 20% of the world’s industrial water contamination that result in aquatic wildlife death and spread of a waterborne diseases (Hossain, 2018). The environmental implications of fast fashion span the entire product lifecycle from fiber cultivation and production to consumer use and disposal (Mugoni et al., 2024). The apparel industries produce about 1.2 billion tons of CO₂ per year, associated with energy-intensive fiber production, dyeing, and logistics; and the corresponding emissions are similar to those of the aviation sector (Schlosberg, 2007). From the carbon perspective, cotton cultivation and synthetic fiber production are also destructive but less carbon-intensive processes (Abrishami et al., 2024).

The process of cotton cultivation and fabric dyeing are highly water-consumptive, leading to huge amounts of freshwater being altered and poisoned (Tiffin et al., 2022). Moreover, the untreated wastewater of this sector releases into rivers that is rich in toxic dyes and heavy metals. The production and laundering of polyester result in microplastic releases into aquatic systems (Uddin et al., 2023). Over time, the population of such fibers grows, resulting in very problematic human and ecological health problems. Globally less than 1% of discarded clothing is processed further, and the rest goes to landfills and incineration that release methane and other pollutants (Moazzem et al., 2021). These cumulative impacts illustrate that the environmental footprint of fast fashion is not limited to the production stage but extends across the full lifecycle of garments (Shamsuzzaman et al., 2025).

6.3 Environmental Justice

Environmental justice (EJ) takes existing discussions on sustainability but leads by situating it on the climate between justice and disadvantaged human groups. It offers an alternative to humanity that extends the discourses based on classical ethics and differences (Schlosberg, 2007). It originates from the grassroots movements of the

1980s, focusing on the argument that the most disadvantaged groups acquire the least benefits from industrial development and bears the bulk of the cross-section of degradation (Abbas-Abadi et al., 2025). It shows that textile waste is likely to reinforce post-consumer colonialism, a phenomenon when the waste and its disposal are externalized by consumer nations to the poorer economies (Harriss, 2022). It enables a more comprehensive understanding of fast fashion's global footprint by critically assessing the impacts on firms, workers, and communities (Bulut et al., 2021). In the fast fashion context, EJ concerns the geographically embedded inequalities of the global production chain (Hossain et al., 2025). Both CE and EJ act as a dual-lens framework, capturing systemic inefficiencies that include “waste, emissions, and overproduction” and systemic injustices that involve “exploitation and inequitable impacts” (Chen & Chang, 2013).

6.4 Integration of CE and EJ

The CE's resource efficiency integrated with EJ's equity focus will ensure that it does not exacerbate social injustices. The integrated CE and EJ framework offers a holistic re-interpretation of sustainability in the fast fashion sector. Technological innovations, compliance with policies, and social responsibility have an interdependent role in achieving a truly sustainable clothing industry (Iannone & De Chiara, 2019). During the production of fast fashion clothes, the CE focuses on resource efficiency, renewable energy, and waste minimization; and the EJ focuses on fair wages, safe conditions, and gender equity; and the integrated of them focuses that sustainable production must be both low-impact and rights-based (Das, 2025). During the consumption of fast fashion garments, the CE focuses on product longevity, reuse, repair, and responsible purchasing, and the EJ focuses on access, affordability, and ethical responsibility; and integrated of them focuses that the sustainable production must be both low-impact and rights-based (Paiva & Silva, 2024). During the end-of-life of fast fashion clothes, the CE focuses on recycling, upcycling, and EPR mechanisms; and the EJ focuses on waste, equity, community health, and fair trade recycling; and the integrated of them focuses that circular systems must prevent burden-shifting to marginalized groups (Pranta et al., 2025).

The perspective of the EJ theory, the criticism needs to be taken one step further and the emphasis is now on who takes the impact. Bangladesh is a form of ecological and social outsourcing (Schlosberg, 2007). It means that to advance CE and CJ, the production system must perform a transition towards decentralized, resource-minimized, and right-regime-based modes of production (Despeisse & di Milano, 2023). This synthesis illustrates that circularity without justice is incomplete, and justice without circularity is unsustainable; and integrating both frameworks transforms sustainability from a technical optimization problem into a socio-ecological transition, where the distribution of environmental benefits and harms becomes central to design, governance, and accountability (Winslow & Coenen, 2023).

7. Challenges and Sustainable Solutions

The fast fashion indicates the creating and delivering products from the initial design and manufacturing of garments to their distribution and retailing (Alexandru & Taşnadi, 2014). Its unsustainable practices have caused significant environmental impact. It is the second biggest consumer of water and is responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions. It dries up water sources, and pollutes rivers and streams, while 85% of all textiles go to dumps each year (Jain, & Jain, 2025).

7.1 Social and Labor Dimensions

The cheap fast fashion clothes supply chain enables cheap clothing for global consumers systems of production, and ultimately reproduces systemic exploitation for the workers. Workers expressed frustration over tokenistic compliance efforts by brands (Kottala, 2021). The social costs of fast fashion are equally severe. Bangladesh, as a major garment exporter, epitomizes the paradox of economic growth through environmental and social compromise (Humayun & Bhavadharani, 2025). Workers predominantly women subject to harmful conditions, face long hours, low payments, wage suppression, subordinate to little-to-no formal rights, and unsafe workplaces. Although international accords and safety initiatives have been introduced, enforcement remains inconsistent (Nahar, 2024).

Gender inequality is particularly acute, as women represent nearly 80% of the garment workforce yet often occupy the lowest-paid and least secure positions (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). The absence of effective union representation further perpetuates vulnerability and restricts collective bargaining power. These conditions highlight the need to align circular economy initiatives with social justice to ensure that sustainability transitions do not reproduce existing inequalities (Wang et al., 2020).

7.2 Key Challenges in Sustainability

Fast fashion is related to fast operations, global sourcing, and air-sea transportation that increase Scope 3 emissions and hinder accountability (Mathew & Spinelli, 2025). The Scope 3 emissions are the GHGs generated by the delivery trucks, business travel, and employee commuting; and also waste generated as part of company operations that occur in the upstream and downstream activities of an organization (Bick et al., 2018). Dyeing

and finishing consume large amounts of freshwater and often discharge untreated wastewater into rivers (World Bank, 2020). Overproduction of garments result in disposal by incineration or landfill (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

The major challenges for fast fashion are downcycling; the lack of effective technologies for post-consumer materials identification and sorting; the inconsistency of post-consumer textiles and apparel; and the contamination of dyes, finishes, and other additives. Some other minor challenges are the lack of information sharing and coordination across the textile, apparel, and recycling industries (Baloyi et al., 2024).

7.3 Risks and Mitigation

The negative environmental impacts of the current linear system of fast fashion are well-documented that result in massive waste and environmental pollution, and require urgent action for sustainability (Hadro et al., 2023). Several risks have threatened the attainment of textile circularity. The risk of quality degradation in recycling processes can be mitigated through the use of chemical recycling for blended fibers, stricter input specifications, better dye, and finish removal (Thomas et al., 2024). The risks of greenwashing and consumer distrust may be mitigated through third party verification, standardized claims, and data sharing enabled by Digital Product Passports (DPPs) (Li et al., 2023). Economic headwinds may provide resistance to investments, and maintaining resilience within the sector will require concentrating on the lifetime value, inventory and optimization (Allen et al., 2024).

The environmental and social crises of fast fashion cannot be solved by isolated measures. The CE and EJ show that the change has to be systemic, uniting efficiency, equity, and ethical approaches. The development of the environmental and social impacts in fast fashion industry is necessary in all stages, such as raw material collection, manufacturing, distribution, consumption and post-consumer waste management (Das et al., 2025a). Fast fashion is a global industry, and international cooperation is necessary to prevent the emergence of regulatory loopholes. Common customs codes and quality standards for second-hand and recycled textiles are required to prevent illegal waste dumping while permitting legitimate cross-border trade (Anner, 2020).

Governments and international institutions must adopt regulatory frameworks that enforce circular accountability and labor protection simultaneously. Extended producer responsibility (EPR) should be mandated to ensure that brands remain responsible for garments throughout their lifecycle (Campbell-Johnston et al., 2022). The possibility of leakage to the landfill or to low-quality export markets should be dealt with through EPR schemes that will define domestic treatment quotas, enforce the quality of exports, and assist in the development of local reuse markets (Gliadelytė et al., 2024). Transparent supply chain mapping must be enforced through digital traceability systems, allowing regulators and consumers to track environmental and social impacts. Incentive schemes: such as tax relief for sustainable practices or tariffs on overproduction, can shift market incentives toward circular innovation (Radulescu et al., 2024). Fast fashion industry of Bangladesh poses severe environmental and social implications along the value chain. Production depletes water, emits GHG and microplastics, and workers remain exploited and subjected to poor working conditions and gender inequality despite the legal attempts (Alexandru & Taşnadi, 2014). Such reforms would require multi-stakeholder collaboration among policymakers, labor unions, and industry associations to balance economic growth with ecological and social stability (Khan & van Dijk, 2024).

To solve the end-of-life products management problems a combined CE and EJ strategies are implemented. For this we have to implement decarbonized logistics, localized production, intelligent inventory management, a circular take-back and recycling scheme, cleaner chemical and water usage, digital and predictive analytics, and adherence to the ESRS and GRI reportage frameworks (Cannavo, 2008). Some industries, such as H&M has applied organic policy on materials and garment collection (Shen, 2014); Zara has adopted emission reduction by rationalized production and clean management; Nike has managed manufacturing waste recycling using grind; and Stella McCartney has applied regenerative materials, immortal design, chain transparency, and operation sustainability that have proven water and carbon reduction outcomes (Monroe, 2021).

7.4 Strategic Solutions

For decarbonized transportations the air freight should be replaced with sea or rail, and prioritize electric vehicles for last-mile deliveries to reduce emissions (Abbate, 2023). For digital optimization predictive analytics and emission-tracking and route-planning software must be applied to drive efficiencies and improve supply chain transparency. Localized production should be increased to reduce lead times, transport emissions, and import taxes and costs (Joy et al., 2012). The cleaner chemical and water management are ensured with the safer dyeing and water-saving technologies. The financing EPR collects should be used to build systems for collection, sorting, and recycling (Nguyen, 2023).

The CE strategies must go beyond recycling and efficiency to restructure value creation across the supply chain. The EJ reframes sustainability to include equity, voice, and empowerment, which ensures that circular transitions do not reproduce exclusion. True sustainability lies in the balance among ecology, economy, and ethics.

Consumers must adopt sustainable consumption behaviors, such as reducing the volume of purchases, using second-hand garments, and accepting repair or rental of clothing (Groenewald et al., 2024).

8. Conclusion

Fast fashion has changed the fashion industry by making fashionable clothing accessible and affordable to common people. It provides clothing industry at an amazing speed with attractive price to the consumers. This study has undertaken a comprehensive analysis to consider the full life cycle of fast fashion and how it can be sustainable. The study has revealed that the industry's production is highly resource intensive and polluting, with textile dyeing, finishing, and synthetic fiber use leading to water pollution, microplastic emissions, and high carbon footprints. Although circular approaches to fashion provide the way forward, they cannot operate in isolation. Meaningful changes will only come through a combination of technological innovation, regulatory enforcement, corporate responsibility, and consumer accountability. The transformation of fashion into a fairer, more sustainable system is not merely a technical challenge but a moral imperative for the twenty-first century. The fashion industry has to play an important role in the path towards sustainability and circular economy for the future development of the textile and clothing sector. The comprehensive sustainability measurements, such as fair wages, gender equity, and safety of working conditions must be developed for the sustainability of this sector.

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