MODERN SILHOUETTE

Weaving the Workday: A Convertible Design Framework for Chanderi Motifs in Modern A-Line Silhouettes for Office-to-Evening Wear

Dolly Thakur, Shveta Anugrah

Department of Fashion Design, Sage University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Chanderi, the sheer, lustrous handloom of Madhya Pradesh, is still sold largely as a ceremonial sari and dupatta fabric. Its motifs are admired, but they are rarely engineered for the working woman who moves between office, social and evening settings in a single day. This paper proposes the Dual-Register Motif Framework (DRMF), a practice-based design method in which Chanderi motifs are deliberately placed, scaled and spaced so that one garment can be read as quiet and professional in the day and as expressive in the evening. The framework is demonstrated through a final design: a modern A-line dress in blue Chanderi with a square neckline, short puff sleeves and a below-knee hem, with motif density increasing from bodice to hemline. The paper analyses motif selection, silhouette, colour and fabric behaviour, and sets out a styling matrix by which the same dress converts into office wear, casual wear and party wear through layering, accessories and proportion alone, without changing the garment itself. The study argues that convertibility is a design property that can be built into a heritage textile at the pattern stage, and that doing so extends the wearing life of a handloom garment, which is a sustainability gain as well as a commercial one.

Keywords: Chanderi; handloom; motif placement; A-line silhouette; convertible fashion; office-to-evening wear; heritage textile; slow fashion

1 Introduction

Indian handlooms carry centuries of technical and cultural knowledge, yet their market position often depends on occasion. A woven sari is bought for a wedding, a festival or a family function, worn a few times and stored. Contemporary urban women, meanwhile, need garments that serve a long day: a morning meeting, a late lunch, an evening event. Fast fashion answers this need with cheap, disposable pieces. Heritage textiles seldom enter the conversation, because they are assumed to be too formal, too delicate or too costly to wear casually.

Chanderi is a good test case for challenging that assumption. It is lightweight, translucent and soft, and its restrained surface ornament sits easily between plain cloth and heavy brocade. Its woven motifs are small, repeatable and modular, which makes them suitable for controlled placement on a pattern piece. The silhouette chosen here, the A-line, is among the most adaptable in womenswear: it flatters a range of body types, accepts layering at the waist and shoulder, and changes character with footwear and accessories

This paper therefore asks how Chanderi motifs can be used in a modern silhouette so that a single dress performs across office, casual and party contexts. It treats this not as a styling trick but as a design problem that begins at the drawing board.

2 Background and literature review

2.1 Chanderi as a textile

Chanderi takes its name from the town of Chanderi in Ashoknagar district, Madhya Pradesh. The cloth is woven on handlooms from fine cotton and silk yarns, and is commonly found in three yarn combinations: silk-cotton, pure silk and cotton. Its defining qualities are a light hand, a slight transparency and a soft sheen, to which gold or silver-toned zari is often added. Ornament is introduced mainly through the extra-weft technique, in which supplementary threads are woven in to form motifs on the ground cloth. Chanderi has been protected as a Geographical Indication, which has strengthened its identity as a place-bound craft (Gillow and Barnard, 1991; Chishti and Sanyal, 1989).

2.2 The motif tradition

Traditional Chanderi ornament is built from small units called butis, repeated across the field, with heavier borders and end-pieces. Commonly described motif families include the coin form (often called ashrafi), floral and lotus forms, birds such as the peacock and swan, and geometric units. These motifs are typically compact, symmetrical and woven rather than printed, which gives them a slightly raised, textural quality that changes with light. This compactness is the property most useful to the present study: a small, self-contained unit can be scaled up, thinned out or clustered without losing its identity.

2.3 Heritage textiles in contemporary fashion

Scholarship on fashion and culture has long noted that clothing is a system of meaning produced by many actors, including designers, institutions and consumers (Kawamura, 2005). Within that system, handloom revival in India has been framed as a cultural and economic project. Design writing on sustainability adds that the environmental value of a garment depends heavily on how long and how often it is worn, not only on how it is made (Fletcher, 2008; Fletcher, 2016). A heritage fabric that is worn only on rare occasions therefore delivers less sustainability value than a welldesigned garment worn repeatedly.

2.4 Convertible and transitional dressing

Transitional or day-to-night dressing is a familiar idea in retail and styling, but it is usually treated at the styling stage, by adding a blazer, a belt or different shoes. Much less attention has been paid to designing the garment itself so that these conversions work: where decoration sits, how the neckline and sleeve behave under a jacket, how the hem moves in different settings.

2.5 Research gap

Based on this review, three gaps are identified. First, Chanderi is documented mainly as a sari and dupatta textile, with limited design literature on its use in structured Western-cut silhouettes. Second, convertibility is discussed as styling advice rather than as a pattern-stage design method. Third, little work links motif-density planning to social context. This paper addresses all three by proposing a framework that connects motif placement to the wearer's changing settings through the day. The author also recommends that the literature search be extended, before journal submission, to indexed databases to confirm that no identical framework has been published.

3 Methodology

The study follows a practice-based design research approach, in which the design process and its output are both sources of knowledge. It combines four stages:

1. **Textile analysis.** Chanderi's yarn structure, drape, transparency and motif technique were examined to identify constraints and opportunities.
2. **Motif analysis.** Traditional motif families were classified by scale, symmetry and visual weight to decide which suit a bodice, a skirt panel and a hem.
3. **Silhouette comparison.** Candidate silhouettes were compared on balance, versatility of motif placement, layering potential and contemporary appeal. The modern A-line was selected as the final design.
4. **Design development and evaluation.** The selected design was developed as illustrations, detail studies and technical flat drawings, and then tested analytically against a convertibility matrix covering three contexts.

This paper does not claim consumer survey results. The evaluation presented is analytical and design-based. A wearer trial and a consumer perception survey are proposed as future work (see Limitations and future work).

4 The Dual-Register Motif Framework (DRMF)

The central proposal of this paper is that a convertible heritage garment should carry two visual registers at once:

- **Quiet register:** what is visible when the garment is worn in its most conservative configuration. Decoration is low in contrast, small in scale and concentrated away from areas that attract attention in a professional setting.
- **Expressive register:** what becomes visible when the garment is worn in its most festive configuration. Decoration is read as a full composition, with a strong lower border, a clear rhythm and visible metallic sparkle.

The framework rests on four design principles:

- **Principle 1. Density gradient.** Motif density increases from the upper body to the hem. Small, widely spaced butis sit on the bodice, medium clusters on the skirt panels, and a dense continuous border at the hem. In a professional setting the eye is held by the quiet upper body, while in an evening setting the movement of the skirt reveals the richer lower composition.
- **Principle 2. Tonal restraint.** Motif colour is set close to the ground colour in value so that daytime contrast is gentle, while zari highlights supply evening sparkle.
- **Principle 3. Structural neutrality.** The cut of the dress is simple and clean, with no seams or openings that clash with a jacket or belt worn over it.
- **Principle 4. Accessory-led conversion.** The garment changes context through layers and accessories, not through alteration, so that no tailoring or extra garments are required between setting5.

5 Design development

5.1 Fabric behaviour and construction

Chanderi's transparency is both an asset and a constraint. In an office context, full opacity is expected. The dress is therefore planned with a soft cotton or silk lining in a matching or slightly deeper shade. The lining also supports the Aline flare and prevents motifs from showing through unevenly. The fabric's lightness means the skirt should be cut with enough sweep to move gracefully but not so much that it becomes bulky at the waist.

5.2 Motif selection

The motif palette combines two families: a small floral bud for the bodice and upper sleeve, and a medium floral-and-leaf cluster for the skirt panels. A band of coin-derived and geometric units forms the hem border. The coin unit is chosen for the hem because its circular shape is visually stable and weighted, giving a grounded finish to the skirt. Placement follows the density gradient described above.

5.3 Silhouette choice

The modern A-line was selected over alternatives because it offers a balanced silhouette, flexible motif placement and strong contemporary appeal. The fitted bodice shapes the torso; the flared skirt provides a large canvas for the motif gradient; and the below-knee length suits the office while still reading as elegant in the evening.

5.4 Colour

The final garment is developed in blue. Blue is associated in many contexts with composure and trust, which suits professional wear, while deeper tones such as navy or midnight blue take on a rich look under evening light. A deep, slightly inky blue is proposed as the ground colour, with ivory or soft gold motifs. This gives enough tonal contrast for the motifs to remain legible while keeping the daytime impression restrained. Blue also pairs readily with neutral outerwear, silver or gold jewellery and metallic accessories, which supports the conversion strategy.

6 Final design: The modern A-line dress

The design specification is summarised in Table 1, and the final design is shown in Figure 1.

Table 1. Design specification of the modern A-line dress.

Element	Specification
Neckline	Square neck
Sleeves	Short puff sleeves with a gathered cuff
Length	Below the knee
Silhouette	A-line, fitted bodice, flared skirt
Fabric	Chanderi (silk-cotton proposed), lined
Colour	Blue (deep ink or midnight tone proposed), ivory-gold motifs
Motif placement	Bodice, sleeves, skirt panels and hem border



Figure 1. The final design, front view (left) and back view (right): modern A-line dress with square neckline, short puff sleeves and a woven border at the hem.

6.1 Neckline and bodice

The square neckline gives a structured, architectural frame to the collarbone and works under a blazer, cardigan or shawl without bunching. Small widely spaced motifs on the bodice keep the upper body composed and professional. Seam lines on the bodice carry fine detailing that adds structure without drawing attention

6.2 Sleeves

The short puff sleeve introduces softness and a contemporary, romantic note. Because Chanderi is light, the puff holds shape with the help of lining and gathering rather than heavy interfacing. The gathered cuff keeps the sleeve neat under a jacket. For stricter office environments, a layer with sleeves is added; for evening, the puff sleeve is allowed to stand out. (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Detail of the bodice and puff sleeve: small, closely repeated motifs, square neckline and gathered cuff.

6.3 Skirt and hem

The skirt is cut in panels so that motif clusters follow the seam lines and flow with the flare. The hem border is the strongest decorative element, bringing the expressive register into play when the wearer moves. The below-knee length avoids the practical issues of a longer hem while still reading as formal enough for work. Figure 3 shows the hem border and Figure 4 the waist ties at the back.



Figure 3. Detail of the woven hem border, the densest band of ornament in the density gradient.



Figure 4. Back view detail: waist ties crossed and bowed at the back, allowing the fit at the waist to be adjusted.

7 Convertibility analysis

The same dress is assessed in three contexts. In each, the garment itself is unchanged and conversion happens through layering, accessories and proportion (Table 2).

Table 2. Convertibility matrix of the dress across three contexts.

Context	Layering	Waist and proportion	Footwear and bag	Jewellery and hair	Resulting register
Office	Structured blazer or long cardigan in a neutral tone	Slim belt, jacket closed	Block heels or loafers, structured tote	Small studs, simple watch, neat low bun	Quiet
Casual (after-work café or errand)	Denim or cropped jacket, or no layer	Belt removed, relaxed fit	White sneakers or flat sandals, canvas or sling bag	Minimal pendant, loose hair	Quiet to neutral
Party (after office hours)	Jacket removed or replaced with a light stole	Metallic belt or sash to define waist	Heels or embellished juttis, potli or clutch	Jhumkas or statement earrings, sleek updo	Expressive

Three observations follow from the matrix. First, the blazer plays a double role: it covers the upper-body sleeve volume and reduces visual noise in the office, but it also frames the dress when open. Second, the density gradient means the most decorative part of the dress, the hem, is visible in all contexts but only reads as dominant when the wearer's movement and styling invite attention. Third,

proportion changes through belting and footwear alter the dress's character more than any change of colour could.

8 Discussion

8.1 Design implications

The framework suggests that heritage-textile designers should plan convertibility before cutting. Decisions about where motifs sit, how dense they are, and how the garment behaves under outer layers determine whether it can be worn beyond a single occasion. For Chanderi specifically, the fabric's lightness and sheen already lean toward evening elegance. The design task is therefore to add daytime restraint, not to add decoration

8.2 Sustainability and cultural value

A garment that can be worn across three contexts is likely to be worn more often, which spreads its environmental cost over more wearings (Fletcher, 2016). For artisans, a market for everyday-wearable Chanderi in modern cuts can widen demand beyond festive seasons, supporting more continuous work. Care is needed, however, that contemporary adaptation respects the weaving tradition and does not reduce motifs to mere surface decoration.

8.3 Commercial potential

The dress addresses a clear user need: a single investment piece that replaces several single-occasion garments. This positions it between everyday workwear and occasion wear, an area where handloom brands can differentiate on authenticity and quality.

9 Limitations and future work

This study is design-based and analytical. It does not include wearer trials, consumer surveys or physical durability testing. The proposed fabric and colour are recommendations and would need to be confirmed with weavers regarding yarn count, availability and dye behaviour. Future work should include a prototype, a wearer trial across the three contexts, a consumer perception survey on convertibility, and a comparison of the framework with other handloom textiles such as Maheshwari, which shares a regional origin.

10 Conclusion

This paper has shown that a heritage textile need not be limited to ceremonial wear. By planning motif density, tonal contrast and silhouette together, a Chanderi A-line dress can carry two visual registers and move between office, casual and party settings with only styling changes. The Dual-Register Motif Framework offers designers a transferable method for turning handloom motifs into everyday luxury, and it offers wearers a garment that justifies repeated use. The framework is a starting point, and future wearer-based evaluation will test and refine it.

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