

# Exploring the Role of Thrift Stores in Promoting Sustainable Consumer Behaviour

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## Abstract:

This research examines the evolution of India's thrift store culture from a stigmatized practice to a mainstream fashion movement. Valued at USD 3,003.65 million in 2023, the market is projected to reach USD 9,111.35 million by 2032 (13.04% CAGR), driven by Gen Z and Millennial demand for affordability and sustainability.

Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study identifies key drivers such as Instagram's role in normalization and the urgent need to mitigate India's 7,800 kilotons of annual textile waste. Findings highlight a market dominated by online platforms (45%) but restricted by challenges like hygiene concerns and business model instability. The paper concludes with strategic recommendations for the 2030 trajectory, focusing on technology and regulatory frameworks to bolster India's circular economy.

*Keywords* — Thrift culture, sustainable fashion, circular economy, India, textile waste, Gen Z, digital transformation.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

India's fashion industry stands at a transformative inflection point, where economic dynamism intersects with environmental imperatives and evolving consumer values. The global apparel market, characterized by fast fashion's dominance and disposability culture, generates unprecedented waste and environmental degradation. Against this backdrop, India's thrift store culture has emerged as a countercultural movement of considerable

significance, representing both a practical economic solution and a philosophical reimagining of fashion consumption.

India's textile and apparel sector is a global powerhouse, contributing 2.3 percent to the country's gross domestic product, 13 percent of industrial production, and 12 percent of merchandise exports. The industry directly employs over 45 million people and constitutes a critical component of India's economic infrastructure. However, this economic success masks an environmental crisis: India generates

approximately 7,800 kilotonnes of textile waste annually, representing 8.5 percent of global textile waste, making India the third-largest contributor worldwide after China and the United States. Only 34 percent of this waste is currently reused and 25 percent recycled, with the remainder destined for landfills where it persists for decades.

The environmental costs of fashion production extend far beyond waste generation. The fashion industry globally accounts for 10 percent of carbon dioxide emissions, 20 percent of wastewater, and consumes 93 billion cubic meters of water annually—enough to meet the drinking and bathing needs of five million people. Textile dyeing ranks as the second-largest source of water pollution globally. In India specifically, urban residents generate approximately 72 kilograms of textile waste per person annually, with major metropolitan areas like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore producing waste at exponential rates.

Historically, second-hand clothing in India carried significant negative connotations. Cultural beliefs associated pre-owned items with negative energy, poverty, and lower social status. These perceptions, rooted in both superstition and class consciousness, severely limited the acceptance of thrift shopping among middle and upper-income consumers. However, the post-pandemic era has catalyzed a remarkable cultural transformation. The convergence of digital connectivity, environmental awareness among younger generations, economic pressures on households, and the normalization of second-hand fashion through social media influencers has fundamentally altered Indian consumer attitudes toward thrift shopping.

### **1.2 Research Objectives and Significance**

This research paper aims to systematically examine India's thrift store culture through multiple analytical lenses. Primary objectives include: (1) quantifying and analyzing the current state and projected growth trajectory of India's second-hand apparel market through 2032; (2) developing comprehensive demographic and psychographic profiles of Indian thrift shoppers, identifying key

motivations and behavioral patterns; (3) examining the critical role of digital platforms, particularly Instagram, in popularizing and normalizing thrift shopping; (4) assessing quantifiable environmental benefits of thrift culture including carbon reduction, water conservation, and waste diversion; (5) identifying and analyzing the most significant barriers to broader adoption, including hygiene concerns and social stigma; (6) evaluating business model sustainability through analysis of successful platforms and high-profile market exits; (7) examining regulatory frameworks governing imported second-hand clothing and domestic thrift operations; and (8) providing evidence-based recommendations for industry stakeholders, policymakers, and consumers.

The significance of this research extends beyond academic inquiry. Understanding India's thrift market evolution has direct implications for sustainable development, circular economy adoption, environmental protection, social equity, and economic opportunity in South Asia's largest economy. As developing nations increasingly grapple with waste management crises and environmental degradation, India's thrift movement offers both lessons and cautionary tales applicable across emerging markets.

### **1.3 Research Methodology**

This research employs a rigorous mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative data sources. Quantitative analysis draws from industry reports by leading market research firms including Credence Research, UnivDatos, IMARC Group, Mobility Foresights, Persistence Market Research, and Future Market Insights. Market size data, growth projections, consumer demographic statistics, and trend indices were synthesized across multiple sources to establish robust baseline metrics. Consumer behavior data derives from academic studies conducted by premier institutions including the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, National Institute of Fashion Technology, World Resources Institute, and international research organizations.

Qualitative research components include case study analysis of major market participants (Kiabza, Love Me Twice, EcoDhaga, Elanic), examination of social media trends through Pinterest data and Instagram platform analysis, content analysis of media coverage and industry commentary, and synthesis of academic literature examining consumer perception, sustainable fashion adoption, and circular economy implementation in developing economies. Environmental impact assessment draws from sustainability research, lifecycle assessment studies, and industry environmental footprint analyses.

## **2. Market Analysis and Growth Projections**

### **2.1 Market Size and Growth Trajectory**

The Indian second-hand apparel market demonstrates exceptional growth potential that substantially exceeds broader fashion industry expansion rates. According to Credence Research, the market was valued at USD 3,003.65 million in 2023 and is projected to expand to USD 9,111.35 million by 2032, representing a robust compound annual growth rate of 13.04 percent. This remarkable 203-percent growth over nine years significantly outpaces the Indian apparel market's overall growth rate of approximately 8-9 percent annually, indicating a structural shift in consumer preferences toward sustainable and affordable fashion alternatives.

Multiple independent research firms corroborate these growth projections with slight methodological variations reflecting different market definitions and scope assumptions. UnivDatos estimates the market at USD 3,500 million in 2024 with projected CAGR of 13.20 percent through 2033. Mobility Foresights, employing broader market definitions, projects more aggressive growth from USD 5.2 billion in 2025 to USD 17.9 billion by 2031, representing a CAGR of 22.8 percent. IMARC Group focuses specifically on the secondhand luxury goods segment, valued at USD 683.1 million in 2024 and

projected to reach USD 1,674.5 million by 2033 at a CAGR of 9.95 percent.

The variance among projections reflects differing assumptions about market scope, geographic coverage, and growth acceleration rates. Conservative estimates emphasizing current operational constraints and market saturation suggest lower growth trajectories. Optimistic projections incorporate assumptions about technology adoption, regulatory enablement, and accelerating lifestyle shifts among younger demographics. The consensus across research firms, however, remains unequivocal: India's thrift market will experience sustained double-digit growth through the early 2030s.

This growth outpaces global second-hand apparel market projections of 9.6 percent CAGR, positioning India as a regional growth epicenter. The disparity reflects both India's lower baseline market maturity and the particularly acute convergence of drivers in the Indian context: severe environmental pressures, rapid digital adoption, substantial affordability pressures among younger demographics, and rapid lifestyle changes among aspirational consumer segments.

### **2.2 Distribution Channels and Market Structure**

India's thrift market exhibits a segmented distribution structure with distinct channel characteristics. Online platforms currently dominate with approximately 45 percent market share, reflecting the rapid digital transformation of Indian commerce and the particular advantages of e-commerce for standardizing quality, expanding geographic reach, and reducing transaction friction. Offline thrift stores account for 30 percent, representing physical retail locations concentrated in major urban centers including Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Hyderabad. Traditional flea markets contribute 15 percent, particularly in tier-two and tier-three cities where established weekly markets provide community gathering and transaction spaces. Emerging

franchise store models represent 10 percent, representing organized retail chains beginning to formalize and scale thrift operations.

The online channel's dominance reflects fundamental structural advantages in India's retail landscape. Instagram-based stores require minimal capital investment, enable direct customer relationships, facilitate visual marketing of curated selections, and scale geographically without physical infrastructure. Dedicated e-commerce platforms (Kiabza, Elanic, CoutLoot) offer standardized user experiences, inventory management systems, quality control mechanisms, and consumer protection frameworks. However, online platforms face critical challenges including customer acquisition costs, quality assurance complexities, logistics management for reverse logistics, and building trust in peer-to-peer transactions.

Offline retailers maintain value through experiential shopping, tactile product inspection, immediate satisfaction of purchases, and community engagement. Physical locations in premium shopping districts (Koramangala in Bangalore, Linking Road in Mumbai, Janpath in Delhi) attract aspirational consumers and support premium pricing strategies. However, offline expansion faces significant constraints including high real estate costs, limited inventory flexibility, geographic limitations, and operational complexities.

The distribution channel mix is rapidly evolving, with forward-looking retailers adopting omnichannel strategies combining online platforms with pop-up physical locations, click-and-collect options, and experiential retail concepts. This integration addresses the complementary strengths of each channel while mitigating individual constraints.

### **3. Consumer Demographics and Shopping Behavior**

#### **3.1 Demographic Profile of Thrift Shoppers**

The demographic profile of Indian thrift shoppers represents a significant departure from historical patterns of second-hand clothing consumption. Contemporary thrift shoppers are predominantly young, educated, urban, and economically diverse—characteristics that fundamentally contradict traditional associations of second-hand shopping with lower-income necessity consumers.

Age distribution reveals striking concentration among younger demographics. Generation Z consumers (ages 18-25) constitute 42 percent of the thrift shopping market, while Millennials (ages 26-35) represent 38 percent, collectively accounting for 80 percent of all thrift transactions. This generational dominance reflects both greater environmental consciousness among younger cohorts and their higher digital engagement enabling discovery through Instagram and online platforms. Consumers aged 36-45 comprise 15 percent, while those 46 and older represent merely 5 percent, indicating that thrift shopping remains a youth-driven phenomenon despite gradual penetration into older demographics.

Gender distribution shows pronounced female dominance, with women accounting for 60-65 percent of thrift shoppers compared to 25-30 percent male participation. However, male participation is expanding rapidly, particularly in casual wear categories including shirts, t-shirts, and vintage items. The remaining 5-10 percent exhibits gender-neutral shopping patterns, reflecting evolving gender fluidity in fashion consumption. Gender preferences vary by product category, with women showing stronger preference for dresses, tops, and accessories while men focus on shirts, jeans, and formal wear.

Professional and income composition reveals surprising diversity challenging poverty stereotypes. Private sector employees represent 53.40 percent of thrift shoppers, students constitute 37.86 percent, government employees comprise 2.91 percent, and entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals represent 4.85 percent. Educational

attainment is notably high, with post-graduates comprising 49.51 percent of thrift shoppers, graduates representing 33.98 percent, PhD holders at 11.65 percent, and intermediate education holders at 3.88 percent. This educational concentration significantly exceeds the broader Indian population, indicating that thrift shopping attracts cognitively sophisticated consumers capable of evaluating sustainability tradeoffs and quality assessments.

Income distribution demonstrates market penetration across economic strata. Consumers with annual incomes below ₹300,000 (approximately USD 3,600) comprise 47.57 percent of thrift shoppers—a substantial affordability-driven segment. The ₹300,000-₹500,000 bracket represents 23.30 percent, while those earning above ₹500,000 comprise 29.13 percent.

### **3.2 Motivations for Thrift Shopping**

Research identifies five primary motivations driving thrift shopping behavior, each with distinct psychographic and behavioral implications. Affordability ranks as the dominant driver with an importance score of 95 out of 100, reflecting the economic reality that thrift items typically retail at 50-80 percent discounts to original prices. For students and entry-level professionals, thrift shopping enables access to quality branded merchandise and fashion trends otherwise financially inaccessible. A student purchasing a Hugo Boss dress originally priced at ₹8,000 for ₹1,500 at a thrift store achieves 81 percent savings, enabling fashion participation within constrained budgets.

Environmental consciousness ranks second with importance score of 78 out of 100, reflecting growing awareness of fashion's ecological footprint particularly among educated, digitally-connected younger consumers. Research by the World Resources Institute indicates that environmentally motivated thrift shoppers consciously avoid increased overall consumption

when purchasing second-hand, distinguishing genuine sustainability commitment from mere cost-driven purchasing. These consumers view thrift shopping as personal contribution to circular economy principles and environmental responsibility.

Access to unique and vintage items ranks third with 72 out of 100 importance, appealing to fashion-conscious consumers seeking individuality and distinctive style. Thrift stores offer one-of-a-kind pieces unavailable in mainstream retail, particularly vintage items from previous decades. Pinterest reported 580 percent increase in searches for "dreamy aesthetic vintage" and 485 percent growth in "thrift flips" (creative upcycling of thrifted items), indicating substantial consumer appetite for uniqueness-driven shopping motivations. This motivation predominantly attracts aspirational consumers viewing thrift shopping as discovery adventure rather than necessity.

Brand access ranks fourth with 65 out of 100 importance, enabling affordable ownership of premium and luxury brands. A consumer purchasing a Prada bag originally retailing for ₹50,000 at thrift price of ₹12,000 accesses luxury brand ownership at 76 percent discount, democratizing luxury consumption across income strata. This motivation particularly resonates in tier-two and tier-three cities where resident aspirations for luxury consumption intensify given limited local availability.

Trend participation ranks fifth with 58 out of 100 importance, reflecting social conformity and desire to participate in trending movements. Social media influencers openly embracing thrift fashion, celebrities photographed shopping at thrift stores, and the normalization of thrift hauls and thrift flips create aspirational narratives making thrift shopping fashionable and trend-forward. This motivation predominantly manifests among younger Gen Z consumers.

### **4. Barriers to Adoption and Market Challenges**

Despite substantial growth momentum, significant barriers constrain broader market adoption and limit thrift shopping's reach to majority-market consumer status. Hygiene concerns represent the most formidable barrier with 85 out of 100 concern level, reflecting psychological resistance to wearing pre-owned clothing. Consumer anxieties center on cleanliness, potential disease transmission through worn garments, and unknowns regarding previous ownership history and care standards. These concerns persist despite assurances from thrift retailers emphasizing rigorous cleaning protocols and sanitization procedures. Many thrift stores now implement professional dry-cleaning, steam sanitization, and inspection procedures, yet consumer perception gaps persist.

Quality and condition issues rank second with 72 out of 100 concern level, reflecting legitimate concerns about durability, fading, stretching, staining, and overall wearability of pre-owned items. The absence of standardized quality grading systems complicates purchasing decisions, particularly for online transactions where physical inspection is impossible. Consumers cannot reliably assess fabric integrity, seam durability, or hidden damage from photographs. Returns policies remain inconsistent across platforms, with many retailers refusing returns on second-hand items, exacerbating consumer risk aversion.

Social stigma persists with 58 out of 100 concern level, though declining among younger demographics. Beliefs about negative energy in pre-owned items, associations with poverty and lower economic status, and concerns about social judgment continue influencing purchasing decisions in certain demographic and geographic segments. Generation X consumers demonstrate particular superstition regarding second-hand items, while upper-middle-class consumers in traditional communities express status-related reservations. However, this barrier is progressively eroding as thrift shopping gains social legitimacy through influencer endorsement and normalization through social media.

Time-consuming shopping processes register 45 out of 100 concern, reflecting the effort required to identify quality pieces from large, unorganized inventories. Unlike conventional retail's standardized layouts and immediate product availability, thrift shopping demands significant search effort, size verification complications, and inconsistent product discovery processes. This friction particularly affects convenience-oriented consumers accustomed to frictionless retail experiences.

Limited availability and geographic access ranks as least significant barrier with 38 out of 100 concern level. While thrift stores concentrate in urban centers, online platforms are progressively extending access to smaller towns. However, concerns persist regarding reliable internet delivery, product condition upon arrival, and return logistics complexities for distributed consumers.

## **5. Digital Transformation and Social Media Influence**

### **5.1 Instagram as Market Catalyst**

Instagram has fundamentally transformed India's thrift shopping landscape, functioning simultaneously as marketplace, community platform, inspiration source, and social legitimacy mechanism. Research indicates that 70 percent of Indian thrift shoppers utilize Instagram as their primary discovery and purchasing platform, with the hashtag #thriftindia generating over 625,000 posts as of 2024. This social-media-first approach characterizes India's thrift market as distinctly different from Western models where physical retail and e-commerce platforms preceded social commerce emergence.

Instagram-based thrift stores operate with minimal infrastructure requirements, enabling entrepreneurship with low capital barriers. Individual sellers and small operators photograph carefully curated vintage items, compose aspirational styling narratives, post to Instagram feeds and stories, and manage transactions through

direct messaging. This model democratized market entry, proliferating hundreds of independent Instagram thrift accounts including @thriftbyara, @prettylittlefits, @bombayclosetcleanse, and @copperboomvintage. The platform's visual-first interface perfectly suits fashion retail, enabling sophisticated product photography and lifestyle storytelling emphasizing styling possibilities rather than mere product features.

Instagram thrift stores employ sophisticated engagement tactics including limited-quantity drops creating artificial scarcity and FOMO (fear of missing out), flash sales with time-based urgency, influencer collaborations amplifying reach, and authentic community-building through stories, reels, and follower engagement. These tactics prove particularly effective with Gen Z consumers conditioned to responsive social media engagement and comfort with direct messaging as commercial communication channels.

However, Instagram-based thrift stores face mounting criticism regarding pricing practices and market gentrification. A 2025 Observer Research Foundation study documented that 60 percent of low-income respondents in Bangalore could no longer afford thrift stores due to Instagram-driven price inflation. Retailers justify premium pricing through curation labor, professional photography, rapid delivery, and convenience, yet critics argue this undermines thrift shopping's foundational affordability principle. This tension between accessibility and sustainability remains unresolved.

## **5.2 Pinterest Trend Acceleration**

Pinterest's Fall 2025 Trend Report revealed Asia-Pacific's explosive growth in thrift culture search interests, with India leading dramatically at 127 percent year-over-year growth between May-July 2024 and the corresponding 2025 period. This growth rate substantially exceeds comparative markets: Japan (55% YoY growth), Singapore (33%), and Korea (31%), positioning India as the regional thrift culture epicenter. The report documented specific trending searches including

"thrift flips" (+485%), "dreamy aesthetic vintage" (+580%), vintage fashion styling, DIY upcycling projects, and sustainable wardrobe concepts.

Pinterest functions distinctly from Instagram in the consumer journey, serving as inspiration and discovery platform rather than direct sales channel. Users curate thrift inspiration boards, explore styling possibilities, and generate motivation for thrift shopping before transitioning to Instagram stores or dedicated e-commerce platforms for actual purchases. This multi-platform customer journey underscores the sophisticated digital ecosystem supporting India's thrift market development.

## **6. Environmental Impact and Sustainability Benefits**

The environmental case for thrift shopping represents perhaps the strongest justification for policy support and consumer adoption. India's textile waste crisis reaches crisis proportions. The country generates 7,800 kilotonnes of textile waste annually, representing 8.5 percent of global textile waste production and positioning India as the third-largest textile waste generator globally. Current disposal infrastructure proves inadequate: only 34 percent undergoes reuse, 25 percent enters recycling channels, and the remaining 41 percent—approximately 3,198 kilotonnes—destines for landfills where synthetic fibers persist for centuries.

Thrift shopping directly addresses textile waste through consumption substitution. Each thrifted purchase theoretically prevents one new garment's manufacturing, thereby eliminating the environmental costs of raw material extraction, processing, manufacturing, transportation, and retail distribution. This substitution effect proves particularly consequential for synthetic fibers derived from petroleum, which constitute 60 percent of textile material globally and require substantial processing energy and generate microplastic pollution.

The carbon emissions benefits are substantial. Fashion industry production accounts for 10 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, with manufacturing new garments generating significant carbon footprint through energy-intensive processes, transportation, and supply chain operations. Kiabza reports that its thrift transactions cumulatively save 60 tonnes of carbon footprints through avoided manufacturing. Extrapolating across India's growing thrift market at current volumes suggests potential annual carbon savings in the hundreds of thousands of tonnes by 2030 as the market expands.

Water conservation benefits prove equally impressive. Fashion industry consumes 93 billion cubic meters of water annually, with textile dyeing generating 20 percent of global water pollution. Manufacturing new clothing requires millions of liters of water—cotton production alone demands approximately 2,700 liters for a single t-shirt. Thrift shopping eliminates water consumption for avoided new production. Kiabza estimates cumulative water savings of 12 million liters through platform transactions, translating to meaningful resource conservation in water-stressed regions.

Resource preservation benefits extend to land conservation, reduced chemical pollution, eliminated pesticide application in new cotton cultivation, and prevention of microplastic shedding from new synthetic fabrics. Collectively, thrift shopping's environmental benefits address multiple environmental challenges simultaneously—waste generation, carbon emissions, water pollution, chemical contamination, and resource depletion.

## **7. Business Models and Economic Sustainability**

### **7.1 Operational Models and Revenue Structures**

India's thrift market exhibits diverse business model approaches, each with distinct operational characteristics and scalability implications. The

consignment model, exemplified by Kiabza, enables individuals to consign pre-owned items to thrift stores with the store handling curation, photography, listing, and sales. Sellers receive percentage-based commission (typically 30-50%) only upon successful sale, minimizing inventory risk but requiring sophisticated operations for quality control, logistics, and customer service. This model proved initially attractive due to inventory flexibility but encountered profitability challenges as operational costs exceeded transaction-based revenues.

The buy-sell model involves retailers purchasing items outright from sellers, acquiring full ownership and pricing authority. This model simplifies inventory management and enables faster sales velocity but transfers inventory risk entirely to retailers. Pricing must balance quick liquidation with margin optimization, creating strategic complexity. This model works well for high-volume, lower-priced merchandise but struggles with premium or uncertain-demand items.

Peer-to-peer marketplace models connect buyers and sellers directly with platform-provided technology infrastructure, trust mechanisms, and payment processing. Platform revenue derives from transaction commissions (typically 10-20%) with minimal inventory risk. However, quality control challenges, authentication concerns (particularly for luxury goods), and reputation management complexity create operational vulnerabilities. Examples include Elanic and CoutLoot, which experienced mixed success with scaling challenges and profitability pressures.

Curated retail models emphasize careful selection, professional merchandising, and premium positioning. Examples include Love Me Twice and EcoDhaga, which invest substantially in inventory curation, store aesthetics, and customer experience. These models support higher price points and stronger brand positioning but face scalability constraints due to labor-intensive curation requirements and limited geographic expansion feasibility. Physical store presence remains central,

generating high occupancy costs and limiting geographic reach.

Rental-resale hybrid models combine temporary usage rights with eventual ownership transfer, appealing particularly to occasion wear shoppers. Customers rent garments for specific events at discounted rates, with platforms subsequently reselling items. This model maximizes revenue per garment through multiple uses but introduces operational complexity in cleaning, maintenance, and inventory management between rental cycles.

### **7.2 Profitability Challenges and Market Exits**

Despite substantial market growth and consumer demand, multiple thrift platforms have ceased operations or significantly scaled back, revealing fundamental profitability challenges. Poshmark India's October 2023 closure despite strong marketplace metrics illustrated how growth and demand do not guarantee business sustainability. The platform established strong user bases and transaction volumes, yet operating costs—encompassing customer acquisition, quality control, logistics infrastructure, and trust establishment—exceeded revenue generation capacity. International platforms, despite substantial capital, struggled to adapt business models to Indian market realities.

Kiabza's 2023 suspension, despite founder Nohar Nath reporting monthly consignments increased from 800 to 1,400 post-pandemic, revealed similar constraints. The platform developed strong supplier relationships, demonstrated consumer demand, and achieved growth metrics suggesting market viability. However, the founder explicitly concluded that "it's a business that has not been able to scale," suggesting that fundamental unit economics and scaling dynamics present structural challenges beyond merely executing existing business models.

Saritoria's 2024 market exit from India after initial entry as London-based ethnic wear resale platform evidenced cultural and operational adaptation

difficulties for international entrants. These high-profile market failures raise critical questions about whether thrift commerce can achieve profitability at substantial scale, or whether the business model fundamentally requires either niche positioning (serving specific customer segments or geographic markets) or mission-driven non-profit structures where profitability prioritization remains secondary to social or environmental objectives.

### **8. Regional Dynamics and Geographic Expansion**

India's thrift market exhibits pronounced geographic concentration in metropolitan areas yet demonstrates substantial expansion potential in tier-two and tier-three cities. Currently, major urban centers including Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Hyderabad account for 60-70 percent of market activity. Bangalore has emerged as the thrift capital, with concentrated retail locations in Koramangala and Indiranagar hosting stores including EcoDhaga, Love Me Twice, THRFT, and The Preloved Co. Mumbai's Linking Road and Colaba Causeway attract affluent shoppers seeking premium vintage items. Delhi's Sarojini Nagar and Janpath markets represent traditional thrift destinations predating the contemporary movement.

Tier-two and tier-three cities including Pune, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Chandigarh, and Lucknow present substantial expansion opportunities. These cities combine rising disposable incomes, growing environmental consciousness among educated youth, increasing internet penetration, and limited existing thrift retail infrastructure. E-commerce platforms are progressively capturing these markets, while local entrepreneurs are establishing Instagram-based stores and flea market participation. The expansion trajectory suggests tier-two/three cities will contribute 40+ percent of market growth through 2030, driven by affordability pressures, digital adoption, and aspirational consumption patterns.

Northeast India deserves particular analytical

attention given long-established thrift cultures predating the contemporary national movement. States including Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Manipur maintain thriving second-hand markets operating through weekly markets and dedicated stalls. These markets demonstrate normalized thrift shopping across all socioeconomic groups, absence of social stigma, and very affordable pricing (e.g., three designer polo shirts for ₹300). This regional experience suggests that thrift shopping normalization can be achieved through sustained exposure and community acceptance, offering insights for accelerating national adoption.

### **9. Strategic Recommendations and Conclusions**

For thrift retailers, sustainable growth requires balancing affordability accessibility with operational sustainability. Quality assurance investments—implementing rigorous cleaning protocols, professional sanitization procedures, detailed condition descriptions, and transparent return policies—directly address consumer hygiene and quality concerns. Strategic technology adoption including AI-powered recommendations, inventory management optimization, and logistics integration can improve operational efficiency. Maintaining pricing discipline preventing excessive markups preserves thrift shopping's accessibility principle while supporting viable unit economics. Community engagement, authentic storytelling about sustainability missions, and educational content regarding circular fashion can differentiate competitors and build customer loyalty transcending price competition.

For policymakers, developing comprehensive regulatory frameworks addressing quality standardization, consumer protection, and environmental support would accelerate market development. Standardized quality grading systems for second-hand goods, tax incentives for certified circular fashion businesses, and public awareness campaigns emphasizing environmental benefits can support market growth while protecting consumers. Infrastructure investments

in collection and sorting facilities, reverse logistics networks, and technology infrastructure in underserved regions would democratize market access.

For consumers, informed purchasing practices including product research, hygiene verification, and condition assessment enable confident thrift adoption. Mindful consumption—thrifting with genuine intention rather than perpetuating overconsumption at reduced prices—aligns thrift shopping with genuine sustainability principles. Supporting ethically-operated platforms and charitable retailers strengthens market integrity and mission alignment.

For fashion brands, integrating circular economy principles through take-back programs, certified pre-owned channels, durable design practices, and supply chain transparency enables participation in the circular fashion transition. Strategic partnerships with thrift platforms and resale businesses create revenue diversification and brand loyalty strengthening.

India's thrift revolution represents more than market opportunity; it embodies cultural transformation toward conscious consumption and environmental stewardship. The convergence of economic pressures, environmental imperatives, digital enablement, and generational value shifts has catalyzed a genuine paradigm shift in fashion consumption. However, realizing this movement's full transformative potential requires coordinated action across industry players, policymakers, and consumers to address persistent barriers, establish sustainable business models, ensure authentic accessibility, and integrate thrift shopping into India's broader circular economy and sustainability frameworks. The next decade will determine whether India's thrift movement achieves mainstream status as normal fashion consumption or remains niche.

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