

FROM FIELD TO FABRIC: ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS OF TEXTILE TRADE IN ISLAMIC HISTORY

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Abstract

In Islamic civilization, the journey from farm to fabric has long reflected a rich relationship between agriculture and textile production. This paper explores how crops like cotton, flax, and silk, cultivated in early Muslim societies, contributed not only to economic growth but were also embedded within religious values and ethical principles. Drawing from Qur'anic teachings, prophetic traditions, and historical records, the study shows how textile-related agriculture was managed in ways that respected environmental balance, encouraged fairness in trade, and supported community well-being. It also highlights how markets, craftsmanship, and state policies in Muslim regions like the Abbasid and Fatimid empires were closely linked to agricultural cycles and textile demand. It also connects these historical insights to present-day sustainability concerns in the fashion and textile industries. With the rise of environmental challenges and ethical dilemmas in global supply chains, the paper argues that Islamic perspectives on moderation, management, and social justice offer timeless guidance. By revisiting the past, this research invites both scholars and industry professionals to rethink how traditional Islamic ethics can shape a more responsible and eco-friendly future for textiles.

Keywords: Islamic textile history, agricultural products, sustainability, Islamic economics, ethical fashion

1. INTRODUCTION

The textile sector has played a significant role in the historical development of Islamic societies, not only as a source of economic vitality but also as a medium for cultural expression and spiritual values. From growing cotton and flax to weaving silk and wool, Muslim communities built a textile economy that was closely tied to agriculture and deeply influenced by Islamic teachings (Bloom & Blair, 2009). In the formative centuries of Islam, there was no rigid divide

between farming and industry; rather, both were seen as complementary aspects of a divinely guided economy that promoted ethical work, sustainable practices, and fair distribution of wealth (Rahman, 1980; Nasr, 1996).

Raw materials such as cotton were grown in areas like Egypt, Persia, and the Indus Valley. Linen from flax and wool from pastoral sources also formed key components of fabric production across the Islamic world (Ahmed, 2013). These resources were handled in accordance with principles derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, including management of the earth (khalifah), economic balance (Mizan), and justice ('adl) (Nasr, 1996; Esposito, 2003). The Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم emphasized the virtue of honest labor, often commending those who worked the land or engaged in trade. His guidance extended beyond productivity, highlighting the ethical and spiritual dimensions of work itself (Denny, 1991). The Companions and later Islamic scholars expanded these teachings into a framework where economic activity served both worldly and spiritual aims (Hassan, 2008).

This article aims to explore the interrelationship between agricultural products and textile traditions in Islamic history through a faith-based economic lens. It examines how religious values shaped the cultivation of materials, the organization of labor, and the circulation of textile goods. The study further investigates case examples from various Islamic regions including Arabia, Andalusia, Persia, and the Indian Subcontinent to demonstrate the historical evolution of textile practices from the field to the fabric (Abu-Lughod, 1989; Lecker, 2007).

In a time when the global fashion industry is grappling with environmental degradation, unethical labor practices, and overproduction, revisiting Islamic textile traditions offers valuable insights. The principle of Tayyib (pure and wholesome), often overlooked in modern economies, can provide a foundation for ethical and sustainable production models (Sardar, 1996; Hassan, 2008). Through historical analysis and Islamic ethical frameworks, this study also seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions on faith-driven sustainability in the textile and fashion industries, particularly in Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan.

By linking Islamic values with agricultural and industrial development, this article repositions textile production not merely as an economic activity but as a reflection of a broader moral and spiritual worldview. In doing so, it offers a unique interdisciplinary perspective that integrates Islamic Studies, agricultural economics, and fashion history.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The textile industry in Islamic history was intrinsically tied to agriculture, economics, culture, and religious ethics. Scholars have explored these connections through multiple lenses from trade and craftsmanship to Qur'anic values and prophetic traditions. This literature review synthesizes academic perspectives on agricultural production, textile development, and their embeddedness in the Islamic worldview.

2.1 Agricultural Foundations of Textile Production

Agricultural products such as cotton, flax, wool, and silk were foundational to the Islamic textile economy. Early Muslim agricultural manuals like those by Ibn al-'Awwam in Muslim Spain highlight advanced techniques in cultivating cotton and flax, as well as the significance of soil management and irrigation (Lecker, 2007). Cotton, especially, became a key export commodity of Egypt, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent under Muslim rule (Ahmed, 2013). These regions adapted and innovated agricultural methods in line with Qur'anic encouragement of productivity and balance with nature (Mizan) (Nasr, 1996).

Flax and wool were also essential fibers. Flax was used to make linen in Syria and Egypt, while wool from sheep and goats played a vital role in Bedouin and settled communities alike (Bloom & Blair, 2009). These natural fibers supported a large sector of home-based spinning and weaving, often carried out by women, and were valued not just for their utility but also for their Tayyib (pure, wholesome) nature, aligning with Islamic ideals of ethical consumption (Hassan, 2008).

2.2 Islamic Teachings and Agricultural Ethics

Islamic sources place great emphasis on the ethical use of natural resources, particularly in agriculture. The Quran frequently references plants, fruits, and crops as signs of God's creation, encouraging their sustainable use. It is said, "He is the One Who sends down rain from the sky, from which you drink and by which plants grow for your cattle to graze. With it He produces for you 'various' crops, olives, palm trees, grapevines, and every type of fruit. Surely in this is a sign for those who reflect." (Qur'an 16:10–11). The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ promoted agricultural work, famously stating, "There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him." (al-Bukhari 513). This ethical orientation toward farming translated into practices that respected environmental stewardship and economic justice (Rahman, 1980).

Scholars like Nasr (1996) argue that Islamic cosmology integrates nature within a sacred framework, wherein agriculture becomes not only an economic necessity but also a spiritual responsibility. Similarly, Sardar (1996) describes the Islamic economy as one based on principles of balance, justice, and moderation concepts that governed both agriculture and industry.

2.3 Textile Craftsmanship and Economic Development

The Islamic world witnessed a golden era of textile craftsmanship, which flourished between the 8th and 15th centuries. Textile production was supported by state-sponsored guilds, urban markets (suqs), and extensive trade routes

such as the Silk Road and Indian Ocean maritime networks (Abu-Lughod, 1989). The demand for fine fabrics led to innovations in dyeing, embroidery, and weaving. Cities like Damascus, Baghdad, Nishapur, and Cairo became global centers for textile exports, particularly of cotton and linen (Bloom & Blair, 2009).

Textile production was not only a commercial enterprise but a deeply artistic and cultural expression. Islamic art motifs such as geometric patterns, arabesques, and calligraphy were woven into fabrics, blending visual aesthetics with religious symbolism (Esposito, 2003). In many regions, textile production was intertwined with waqf (charitable endowments), where profits were used to fund mosques, schools, and public services, a clear manifestation of the faith-economy relationship (Hassan, 2008).

2.4 Women's Contribution in Islamic Textile Economy

Women played a vital role in both agricultural processing and textile production. Spinning, dyeing, and weaving were often home-based industries managed by women, particularly in rural areas. Islamic legal traditions allowed women to own property and engage in trade, which extended to the textile markets of Andalusia, Persia, and Mughal India (Ahmed, 2013). These practices not only offered economic autonomy but also reflected the inclusive economic ethics of Islam (Rahman, 1980).

2.5 The Decline and Revival of Islamic Textile Traditions

With colonization and industrialization, many traditional agricultural practices and hand-made textile industries in the Muslim world were disrupted. However, contemporary movements in Islamic countries are revisiting these traditions under the banners of halal fashion, ethical sourcing, and eco-Islamic design (Sardar, 1996; Hassan, 2008). Scholars emphasize that integrating historical Islamic principles with modern sustainability can help revive the spiritual and environmental integrity of the textile sector.

Pakistan, as a major producer of cotton and textiles is exploring Islamic ethical frameworks for textile policy and development. The Tayyib approach to agriculture and production is gaining traction in academic and policy discussions, with efforts to align the industry with both global standards and Islamic values (Hassan, 2008).

3. THEORETICAL AND ISLAMIC FRAMEWORK

Islamic thought provides a comprehensive worldview that integrates economic activity, environmental stewardship, and social justice. Agriculture and textile production, as economic practices in Islamic societies, were never isolated from religious and moral considerations. Instead, they were embedded in an ethical framework derived from the Qur'an, Sunnah, and classical Islamic teachings. This part will examine the theoretical underpinnings of Islamic teachings related to agriculture, labor, production, and their relevance to textile traditions.

3.1 Agriculture in the Qur'anic Vision

The Qur'an frequently references agricultural processes as signs (āyāt) of divine wisdom and mercy. Verses such as: "And He sends down rain from the sky, bringing forth thereby fruit of varying colors..." (Qur'an 35:27) and "It is He who produces gardens... and olives, and dates, and crops of different shapes and tastes..." (Qur'an 6:141) and "Let man look at his food—how We pour down water in abundance, then split the earth open, and produce therein grain, grapes and herbage, olives and date palms, gardens of dense foliage, fruits, and pasture for your benefit and that of your livestock." (Qur'an 80:24-32) highlight the importance of agriculture not only for survival but for reflection and gratitude toward the Creator (Abdel Haleem, 2010).

The Quranic discourse on agriculture emphasizes balance (Mizan), moderation, and non-excess. It is said, "O Children of Adam! Dress properly whenever you are at worship. Eat and drink, but do not waste. Surely, He does not like the wasteful." (Qur'an 7:31), values that align closely with today's principles of sustainable development. These verses formed the basis of a spiritual ecology in Islamic civilization where land was not owned for exploitation but entrusted by God as an Amanah (trust) (Kamali, 2010).

3.2 Prophetic Traditions on Farming and Trade

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ strongly emphasized the dignity of labor, including farming and trade. He reportedly said, "No Muslim plants a tree or sows seeds and a bird, or a person, or an animal eats from it, but it is regarded as a charitable gift (Sadiqah) for him." (al-Bukhari 2320). And The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: "If the Day of Judgment comes and one of you has a sapling in his hand, let him plant it." (Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Musnad, Hadith 12902)

This Hadith reflects a deep theological ethic that frames agriculture not merely as work but as a form of ibadah (worship) when done with the right intention (Khan, 2007). The Prophet also stressed honesty in trade, condemned hoarding, and emphasized fairness in weights and measures. It is said, "Woe to those who give less [than due], Who, when they take a measure from people, take in full. But if they give by measure or by weight to them, they cause loss. (Qur'an 83:1-3), which were essential principles in textile-related commerce (al-Qaradawi, 1995).

These teachings shaped early Muslim economic thought, where agriculture was seen as the foundation of sustenance and textile production as a means of dignified livelihood (Islahi, 2009).

3.3 Islamic Economic Thought and Textile Ethics

The Islamic economic system is built upon five core principles: Adl (justice), Ihsan (benevolence), Shura (consultation), Zakat (charity), and Tawheed (oneness of God and interdependence of creation) (Chapra, 2000). These

values inform not only financial dealings but also production processes. In the context of textiles, this meant ensuring that laborers especially women and weavers were treated with respect and paid fairly, raw materials were not wasted, and products were useful and Tayyib (pure and wholesome).

Zakat on agricultural produce, mentioning in these words, “He is the One Who produces gardens both cultivated and wild and palm trees, crops of different flavors, olives, and pomegranates similar ‘in shape’, but dissimilar ‘in taste’. Eat of the fruit they bear and pay the dues at harvest, but do not waste. Surely, He does not like the wasteful”. (Qur’an 6:141) also reinforces the idea that the fruits of land and labor must be shared with the less fortunate, reinforcing social solidarity. Scholars such as Ibn Khaldun noted that flourishing industries like textiles were directly tied to stable agriculture, just governance, and ethical economic structures (Ibn Khaldun, 1967).

3.4 Legal and Ethical Instruments: Hisbah and Halal

The hisbah system a moral regulatory institution in Islamic governance ensured market ethics, including in textile bazaars. Inspectors (muhtasib) were appointed to monitor weights, quality of fabric, pricing, and the working conditions of artisans (Akgündüz, 2011). The concept of halal extended beyond food, encompassing all permissible economic activities. This included ensuring that textile dyes were non-toxic, animal fibers were from halal sources, and production avoided exploitative practices.

Modern reinterpretations of halal and Tayyib are being used today to promote eco-friendly, ethically sourced clothing in the Muslim world (Hasan, 2016). These ideas, deeply rooted in Islamic jurisprudence, resonate with contemporary concerns around ethical fashion and sustainable agriculture.

4. Case Studies from Islamic History

Textile production in Islamic civilization was deeply connected to agricultural systems across different regions. The cultivation of cotton, flax, wool, and silk not only supported the clothing needs of Muslim societies but also became a critical part of their economic infrastructure. Now we present regional case studies to illustrate how agricultural products formed the foundation of textile traditions in Islamic history, focusing on Egypt, Al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), Persia, and the Indian Subcontinent.

4.1 Egypt: Cotton and Flax in the Nile Valley

Under Islamic rule from the 7th century onward, Egypt became a major center for cotton cultivation. The fertile Nile Valley provided ideal conditions for cotton growth, and the crop was actively promoted by Fatimid and later Mamluk rulers. Egyptian cotton, known for its softness and durability, became highly sought after in both domestic and international markets (Beckert, 2014). Alongside cotton, flax was widely cultivated to produce linen, which was used for clothing, turbans, and shrouds.

Islamic jurists discussed the proper Zakat (alms) applicable to agricultural produce, including cotton and flax, emphasizing fair distribution of wealth from landowners to the poor (al-Misri, 1994). Cairo’s textile workshops were regulated by hisbah officials who ensured quality control, ethical wages, and fair trade (Akgündüz, 2011). The integration of agricultural production, urban manufacturing, and religious ethics created a thriving textile economy that was rooted in Islamic values.

4.2 Al-Andalus (Muslim Spain): Wool and Silk in a Flourishing Economy

Al-Andalus became one of the most sophisticated regions of the medieval Islamic world. The region’s temperate climate supported sheep rearing, and wool became the most dominant textile material. Cities like Córdoba and Granada emerged as centers of wool processing, dyeing, and weaving, especially during the 10th to 13th centuries (Fierro, 2011).

Silk, though originally imported from the East, began to be cultivated in limited areas of southern Spain, such as Almería. The Islamic government encouraged mulberry tree plantations to support local silk production, a classic example of agricultural planning for industrial needs (Goitein, 1967). Andalusian scholars like Ibn Hazm and Ibn Rushd discussed not only theology and philosophy but also agricultural and economic practices, advocating a balance between material development and moral responsibility.

The Andalusian textile economy reflected Islamic ideals of wasatiyyah (moderation), barakah (divine blessing), and equitable labor. Textile production was often a family enterprise, with women playing significant roles in spinning and embroidery (Ahmed, 1992).

4.3 Persia (Iran): Dyeing and Decorative Textile Traditions

Persia had ancient tradition of textile craftsmanship prior to the Islamic era, but this heritage was further refined under successive Muslim dynasties. The Safavids (1501–1736) patronized textile workshops that used locally cultivated cotton and wool. Persian cities like Isfahan became renowned for their silk brocades and carpet weaving industries that relied heavily on agricultural and pastoral inputs (Canby, 2009). The lavish imperial robes featuring brocade, velvet, gold embroidery, and fine silks reflect the highly developed and hierarchical textile craftsmanship of Muslim-period Persia (Eskandar Beg Monshi 1978, 971) (Nizam Qari 1303 AH, pp. 22-23). Such detailed attire distributions highlight both luxury production and social stratification through fabric.

Dyeing was a highly developed art in Persia, with vegetable-based dyes such as indigo, saffron, and madder used to produce rich hues. These dyes were derived from agricultural crops and wild plants, requiring specialized knowledge

of farming and chemistry (Matthee, 2012). Islamic law ensured that these activities remained within the bounds of environmental care and ethical labor.

The Persian model exemplifies how Islamic societies viewed textile production not merely as craft or commerce but as a synthesis of art, agriculture, and religious devotion. Quranic calligraphy and floral motifs inspired by Paradise often adorned Persian textiles, symbolizing the unity of faith and aesthetic expression (Nasr, 1987).

4.4 The Indian Subcontinent: Cotton and the Mughal Textile Legacy

With its vast cotton fields and long-standing weaving traditions, the Indian Subcontinent became one of the world's largest textile producers under the Mughals. Cotton was the dominant agricultural product, and cities like Lahore, Delhi, and Multan developed into textile hubs (Chandra, 2007). The Mughal emperors supported rural cotton farming while establishing imperial karkhanas (workshops) for large-scale weaving and dyeing (Abu'l-Fazl, 1873, pp. 89) specially Orrisa in the time of Aurangzeb was the hub of cotton and silk clothing (Sarkar 1901, 47).

Islamic ethics governed the economic structures in these workshops. The *Ain-i-Akbari*, a detailed Mughal-era administrative text, records that strict codes were followed in the selection of cotton, the supervision of dyers, and the wages of spinners (Abu'l-Fazl, 1590/2000). The notion of *istihsan* (juridical preference) was often invoked to improve working conditions and ensure justice in employment practices (Rahman, 1980).

Mughal textiles were exported globally and were especially admired for their vibrant colors and block prints. These designs often carried spiritual themes, including verses from the Qur'an, symbolic geometry, and imagery of the cosmos underscoring the spiritual significance of textile art in the Islamic tradition (Eaton, 1993).

5. Contemporary Relevance: Islamic Values and Sustainable Practices in Modern Textile and Agriculture

The contemporary global textile industry faces a crisis of sustainability. Environmental degradation, exploitative labor practices, and unsustainable consumption patterns have led to a growing awareness of the need for ethical and environmentally sound production methods. In this context, Islamic teachings offer a timeless ethical framework that can be adapted to modern agricultural and textile practices. Principles such as *khilāfah* (stewardship), *ihsān* (excellence and benevolence), *'adl* (justice), and *ḥalāl/Tayyib* (permissible and pure) can offer valuable insights for addressing these challenges (Nasr, 1996; Sardar, 2014).

5.1. Khilāfah and Environmental Stewardship

Islamic scripture repeatedly emphasizes humanity's role as caretakers of the earth: "It is He who has made you successors upon the earth..." (Qur'an 35:39). The concept of *khilāfah* calls for responsible interaction with natural resources, promoting sustainable agricultural practices that avoid exploitation and degradation (Foltz, 2006). This principle can be applied to cotton and flax farming, where Islamic guidance would encourage crop rotation, water conservation, and organic methods to preserve soil health and biodiversity (Dien, 2000).

Modern fashion brands in Muslim-majority countries, such as Pakistan and Indonesia, have begun exploring organic cotton farming aligned with these values. Initiatives like the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) are examples of how sustainability can align with Islamic ethical frameworks when fairness, care for the environment, and long-term productivity are prioritized (Khurshid et al., 2020).

5.2. Ihsān in Craftsmanship and Textile Production

The Islamic value of *ihsān*, often translated as doing what is beautiful and excellent, extends beyond worship to include all aspects of life, including work and craftsmanship. In textile production, *ihsān* demands respect for the dignity of labor and the production of high-quality, enduring products rather than mass-produced, low-quality goods that fuel waste and consumerism (Ahmed, 2013). The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ emphasized quality and moderation, both relevant today in the era of "Fast Fashion."

Contemporary slow fashion movements resonate with this Islamic ethic. Brands and designers inspired by Islamic principles are revisiting traditional weaving, dyeing, and embroidery techniques that support artisans and promote ethical labor, thus fulfilling *ihsān* and encouraging local, circular economies (Lewis, 2018).

5.3. 'Adl and Social Justice in Labor

Justice (*'adl*) is a core Islamic principle, particularly in economic transactions and labor relations. The Prophet ﷺ stated, "Give the worker his wages before his sweat dries" (Ibn Mājah, 2443), underlining prompt and fair compensation. In the textile industry today, especially in developing countries, labor exploitation remains rampant, with poor wages, unsafe conditions, and child labor being pervasive issues (Anker & Anker, 2021).

Islamic guidance mandates fair contracts (*'uqūd*), ethical treatment of workers, and the prohibition of oppression (*ẓulm*). Faith-aligned textile businesses can lead by example, ensuring labor rights, cooperative ownership, profit-sharing models, and transparent supply chains that reflect Islamic economic justice (Chapra, 1992; Kamali, 2002).

5.4. Ḥalāl and Tayyib: Purity and Permissibility in Materials

The Qur'anic instruction to consume what is *ḥalāl* (permissible) and *Tayyib* (pure and wholesome) (Qur'an 2:168) applies not only to food but also to consumption in general. In textile and agriculture, this extends to the use of non-toxic dyes, ethically sourced materials, and products that are not harmful to the environment or people (Siddiqi, 2008). Islamic principles would discourage using hazardous chemicals in dyeing processes or genetically modified crops that harm biodiversity. Instead, natural dyes, eco-friendly alternatives, and handmade processes are more aligned with

Tayyib standards. Islamic fashion initiatives, especially among younger Muslim entrepreneurs, are increasingly branding their products as halal, not just in legalistic terms but as ethically pure (Lewis, 2018).

5.5. Zuhd and Responsible Consumption

Islamic asceticism (zuhd) promotes simplicity, moderation, and minimalism. In a world plagued by hyper-consumption and fashion waste, this Islamic ethic urges Muslims to avoid extravagance and overconsumption. “Indeed, the wasteful are brothers of the devils...” (Qur’an 17:27). These teachings challenge modern capitalist ideals of fashion that encourage constant novelty and rapid consumption (Esposito, 2003).

Faith-based campaigns advocating for mindful clothing consumption such as buying less, reusing garments, or investing in handmade or artisanal products align with this value. Some Islamic NGOs and sustainability advocates are combining these teachings with environmental activism, urging Muslim consumers to shop ethically and support slow fashion (Rehman & Alharthi, 2021).

5.6. Case Studies and Faith-Driven Models

Recent initiatives in countries like Malaysia, Turkey, and Pakistan illustrate the integration of Islamic values into modern textile industries. Examples include:

Sustainable Islamic Fashion brands such as Sefamerve and Modanisa, promoting modest yet sustainable apparel. Pakistan’s organic cotton initiatives under organizations like WWF-Pakistan that promote soil-friendly farming and fair labor. Halal certification standards being extended to textiles, ensuring that products meet ethical and environmental standards (Khurshid et al., 2020).

Academic institutions and think tanks are also beginning to study “Islamic environmental ethics” and their relevance for the 21st century textile economy (Foltz, 2006). There is growing potential to create frameworks that merge Shariah compliance with SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), enabling Muslim countries to become leaders in ethical textile production.

5.7. Challenges and the Way Forward

While the moral foundation is robust, challenges remain. Many Muslim-majority countries lack infrastructure, policy support, or consumer awareness to fully implement faith-based sustainability models. There is also a need for greater cross-sector collaboration between ulama, textile experts, environmental scientists, and business leaders.

Educational institutions can play a key role in reintroducing Islamic ecological ethics into fashion and design curricula. Government incentives and public-private partnerships can support faith-aligned entrepreneurship. International organizations, such as the Islamic Development Bank, are also well-placed to fund sustainable textile ventures that align with Islamic ethics.

CONCLUSION

The longstanding relationship between agriculture and textile production in Islamic history reflects a deeply rooted tradition of ethical and sustainable practice. Guided by Qur’anic teachings and Prophetic wisdom, Islamic societies cultivated a worldview that emphasized care for the environment (khilafah), fairness in economic dealings (‘adl), moderation (wasatiyyah), and the welfare of both workers and consumers. These values shaped a textile economy that honored the balance of nature, uplifted the dignity of labor, and discouraged profit-driven excesses. In today’s world where the fashion and textile industries face growing criticism for environmental harm and labor abuses this legacy holds powerful relevance.

Principles such as Tayyib (wholesomeness), Mizan (equilibrium), and ihsān (compassionate excellence) offer a spiritual and ethical framework for transforming modern textile practices. These concepts can inform more responsible approaches to sourcing raw materials, regulating working conditions, and promoting conscious consumer behavior particularly in Muslim-majority regions where textile production remains vital to the economy. By drawing connections across Islamic Studies, historical textile traditions, and contemporary sustainability debates, this study shows that Islamic civilization once fostered a model of production that was not only economically effective but also environmentally and morally grounded. Revisiting this model is more than a historical reflection; it presents a timely opportunity to realign today’s industries with principles that serve both people and the planet.

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