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Cloth that lies: the secrets of recycling in India

There has long been perceived to be a divide between scholars of clothing, dress history and contemporary fashion on the one hand, and work on the economic and social conditions of the production and consumption of cloth on the other (Taylor 2002). Whilst the former are often accused of fetishising the object through obsessive description without due regard for a wider social context (Fine & Leopold 1993), the latter conceal a mysterious lacuna with regard to the materiality of the thing itself, and an unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of the ephemerality of fashions (Styles 1998). Although a few anthropological studies of cloth have begun to bridge this divide (e.g. Weiner & Schneider 1989), in both studies of cloth and clothing the main emphasis has always been on the way cloth is turned into clothing, effecting a subsequent separation between the two. In effect this implies the dissolution of our interest in the materiality of cloth as it gives way to our interest in the sociality of clothing.

What has been largely neglected is the inverse transformation. It is not that people do not recognise that clothing is often transformed back to fibre and rags, but it is assumed that that constitutes the end of our concern for the social life of clothing. However, there is a largely unacknowledged and invisible world in which this secondary transformation becomes productive, not just of various forms of social relations, but also of massive cultural flows that create new connectivities that are typical of the way the world is being constantly reconstructed (Latour 1993; Appadurai 1996). What is almost completely absent from these accounts is the centrality of the materiality of cloth itself and the propensities of fibre and textile to become the medium by which these flows and their consequences are realised.

Historical research in India has helped highlight the way many attributes of cloth itself that we either ignore or fail to acknowledge have been central to the perception and subsequent use of cloth as an agent in South Asia (Bayly 1986). For example, the ability of cloth to become the transformative medium that absorbs the essence of a venerated older person and is wrapped around a new born baby as a protection. There is the means through which colour and fibre are used to construct a polarity, at one end of which stands the bride, shimmering in her bright red and gold silks and at the other end the widow in her pale cottons. Then there is the dynamism of the acquisition of clothing, in which a person's very substance is made evident in the density and scale of her wardrobe of accumulated fabrics,

often gifted at important events during her life. This in turn echoes the ideal distancing from materiality through separation and loss that gives the elevation required by renunciation appropriate to later life.

All of this is familiar, perhaps even classic, anthropological territory, but during fieldwork in New Delhi and the Punjab, I was exposed to very different images of transformation. *These* images are of huge piles of cast-off clothing from both India and the West, in markets, streets and warehouses. No longer desired as beloved envelopes of the self that once projected multivalent images of belonging and difference, these discards are peeled away from the body, as a snake sheds its skin, through routine practices of detachment and riddance. I argue that in the process recounted below, it is not the form and fashion of the clothing that is of value, but rather the phenomenal, perceptual qualities of fibres, textures, colour and pattern. These attributes of cloth can be conceived as ‘qualisigns’, referring to Munn’s use of the Piercian term, that is, ‘icons that exhibit something other than themselves *in* themselves’ (1986: 74). They can possess characteristics of both passive decay, for example fragility, impermanence and vulnerability, and at the same time of active regeneration and reconstitution through their ability to be re-constituted in new configurations of material form and surface design. It is these material and hence perceptual qualities of cloth that can be released and set free from the structures and strictures of clothing.

Garments that once constituted the permeable layers connecting inner self to outer sociality have many trajectories once they no longer hold a value in the wardrobe. In India, old clothing is dealt with in similar ways as those which have been documented in the West and elsewhere. It may be hoarded as family heirlooms or emblems of group identity (Weiner 1992; Tarlo 1996), individual mementoes (Stallybrass 1993; Stewart 1993), handed onto younger family members, given to servants (Lemire 1991), or reused and recycled creatively within the home as an expression of love and thrift (Greenfield 1986; Seriff 1996). All these options conserve the connection between cloth and the body, valuing the signs of such former presences, and often utilising them to create both intimacy and hierarchy. The last resort is to simply throw clothing away in the rubbish bin, a fate which never befalls it in India, and rarely in the UK.

One further option remains, their re-commodification. The previous inhabitants of this category of clothing have realised the full value of these material qualities through using

culturally appropriate systems of exchange. In the West, this largely means giving them to charity organisations in the West who then resell them on the global market, resulting in the feeling of having done something altruistic as well as ridding oneself of the unwanted burden of former selves. In India, middle-class housewives barter them for shiny steel cooking utensils, a highly valued resource within the woman's domestic economy. In both cases, what is created through riddance is exchange value, or 'getting something for nothing'. The unwanted clothing thus slips from being transient in value (declining) to rubbish, from where it can be rescued and reinvested with value, on the way to becoming more durable in value once more (Thompson 1979).

These discards constitute a vast resource in India, both imported from abroad via international dealers and produced locally through the bartering system. Mountains of trash wait to be transformed into treasure. Container loads of rags are shipped in from all around the developed world, and re-located in massive warehouses across northern India, but remain invisible to all except those who work within them. These constitute the raw material from which new, 'Indian' products will be manufactured. Nearby in local markets in small towns and major cities are found equally massive heaps of unwanted Indian clothing, saris, *shalwar kamiz* and suiting here being sorted, selected and offered for sale. From this mass of material, dealers and fabricators create new products and niche markets through entrepreneurial recycling, producing clothing for the local poor and fashionable street gear for Westerners. These images are much less familiar than the typical bridal scene, or the image of the spiritual absorbency of the sacred thread, but actually they are in their own way a potent form of interconnected change that is transformative both of people, of India and increasingly of international connections. I now want to elaborate on these two examples of a kind of bilateral symmetry in trade, by showing how understanding them requires much more attention to the specific materialities involved.

The recycling of Indian clothing

I have described both the commodification of Indian clothing elsewhere in more detail (Norris 2004a) and its subsequent recycling by entrepreneurial dealers (Norris 2004b). Here I will only briefly sum up the main dynamics of the process in order to make the comparison with the importing of used clothing from abroad. Periodically, middle and upper class Indian women sort through their clothing, and put to one side garments which they wish to divest. Good quality clothes are usually passed onto younger family members, while worn

clothes are handed onto maids and servants in carefully prescribed amounts, but women are reluctant to hand over items which are considered 'too good for the maid'. Especially in urban middle-class households, there is now an increasing surplus of unwanted stuff which will not wear out, and for which more traditional routes of re-use and disposal cannot accommodate. These clothes represent an emotional, economic and social investment and are never just thrown out. Their commodification begins with Indian housewives bartering their families' old clothing for stainless steel kitchen pots on the doorstep. Such pots are favoured by women across India, and are often artistically arranged on kitchen shelves; indeed, they are one of the main components of a woman's dowry, along with her trousseau and other domestic goods.

The women dealers who carry out this trade are members of the Waghri caste, known as itinerant traders. Classified by the British as criminals and untouchables, they are still looked down upon, and householders warn that they are casing the joint for return visits by their husbands. Implying that the Waghri men are all thieves and worse, they are making an obvious identification of person with the rubbish goods in which they trade. These dealers are the mainstay of a flourishing informal economy which removes the waste from the threshold of the household and takes it out into society to be reprocessed into desirable products; in Indian cosmology, this makes them polluted through their trade in terms of classification, and hence dangerous to members of middle-class households.

After a lengthy period of exhaustive haggling on the doorstep the deal is sealed. Pieces of disintegrating cloth have been turned into shiny new metal pots, a translation of form into a more durable, desirable product, equally, if not better, able to represent and reflect a woman's sense of identity and values. The Waghri women carry away overflowing bundles slung across their backs, returning to their homes in a suburb of northern Delhi (Fig. 1). Nearly 40,000 people in the extended neighbourhood live in families that are involved in the trade in some fashion. Every lane is festooned with used garments, in the process of being washed, mended, stockpiled and sorted ready for re-sale and transformation, yet the suburb remains hidden from the middle-class city-dweller from whom the clothing has been harvested. Indeed, it is this invisibility that allows for such radical translations of form and the overturning of previous regimes of value.

Every morning before dawn, a huge market attracts thousands of buyers and sellers. Rows of women sit behind piles of clothing, calling out their wares to the circulating buyers.

These are more usually men, who buy selected types of clothing for niche markets. Some dealers specialise in cotton saris and dhotis, which are torn into squares, and amassed until bulk shipments can be made to factories around the world for use as machine wipers. Others specialise in old army uniforms, blue jeans, men's shirts, and shoes. The value of women's clothing is largely defined according to fabric quality, decorative features and hence suitability for wear by the poor. However, in an inversion of middle-class values, a new-looking synthetic *shalwar kamiz* will fetch more than an older cotton version, as ease of laundering and low maintenance is more important. These clothes are usually pressed and folded, and sold at weekly markets. The market acts as a centrifugal force for processing waste - in the search for a new retail niche, traders will buy in the cities and then travel out through the satellite towns and villages, bringing new fashions and a variety of garments with them.

The highest profits are to be made from silky saris. Here middle-men accumulate saris with decorative borders and ends to be sold on to dealers who transform them into international products. Saris are cut into small pieces avoiding tears and stains and made into patchwork cushions, hangings and bedspreads. Other manufacturers specialise in making clothing such as sundresses, skirts, trousers, hot pants and short halter-neck tops, often copying designs from clothing worn by foreigners. These are then sold on to tourists, and both buyers and sellers interact to create up-to-the minute fashions in major budget traveller's destinations across India. Some of these travellers engage in selling them abroad, importing quantities of them for sale in markets and festivals across Europe, America, Japan and Australia. In a few cases, Western entrepreneurs have joined forces with the makers, subsidising small manufacturing units and creating a consolidated supply chain of goods. These developments reveal the increasing economic rewards to be made from such transformation of cheap resources. But it has been taken one step further by the popularity of Indian furnishings in the West. Some major high-street retailers have started selling 'sari cushions' and so on, but in order to retain a regular supply of unblemished goods, these products are made to imitate their recycled originals, and now use new, clean fabric.

The recycling of imported clothing

The importers

I now turn to the particular trade in used Western clothing imported into India, for it provides an extraordinary example of the various, often invisible, means through which value is maximised in the market. The dynamics of this trade as described below are illustrated in Diagram 1. The global trade in second hand clothing has been highlighted by Tranberg Hansen's study of *Salaula* in Zambia (2000), in which she documents in detail the mechanisms through which clothing is sold in the international market. In the West, cast off knitted jumpers and coats originally donated to charities are often unsuitable for sale within those countries. Rigorous sorting procedures at depots such as "Wastesavers" in Yorkshire, England are designed to ensure that the value of a particular garment is maximised for the charity who collects them, sifting out retro-fashions and high quality classic items for re-sale in specialist shops, and unwearable garments to be sold as machine wipers and filling material. Those items that are deemed unsuitable for sale in Western charity shops are sold to independent recycling companies, who then grade and sort them by fibre content, before baling them and selling them abroad by the container load.

Used clothing is therefore traded internationally as a commodity, originating in Western countries such as the USA, Canada, Europe, Australia and Japan.¹ These recycling companies are the direct descendants of the 18th and 19th century 'Rag and Bone' men, now trading in huge volumes in global markets. These clothes are often sold on as garments, prized as quality clothing of Western origin and therefore different, new and potentially fashionable (e.g. Hansen 1994), or to provide basic bodily protection for the poor. Governments can treat them as an addition to an impoverished economy unable to afford new clothing (e.g. Pakistan, Bangladesh), or as a threat to indigenous industries, imposing various levels of protectionist import restrictions (e.g. Kenya, India).²

¹ In the UK, of personal and household textiles (post-consumer waste), 43% becomes second-hand clothing, 12% wiping cloths, 22% filling materials, 7% for fibre reclamation, 9% are re-used second-hand shoes and 7% is rejected as waste (*Textile Recycling Association* August 1996).

² A position supported by the International Textile, Garment and Leather Worker's Federation., who campaign on behalf of Bengali workers amongst many others, especially in Africa. See <http://www.itglwf.org> (Accessed 27th February 2004)

The importation of used clothing for resale in India is legally restricted to those holding an import license from the Ministry of Commerce.³ Those used clothing imports that are approved are subject to a 200% import tax, unless it can be proved that they have been imported by a recognised charity for free distribution to the needy. As there is considerable demand for cheap second-hand Western clothing in India and a flourishing black market, especially men's clothes and woollens, the Indian Customs officials have to determine whether an application to import clothing for charitable purposes is indeed *bone fide*. Some smaller organisations have been found to be acting corruptly, using charitable organisations as a front with profits siphoned off by high level officials. But policing such trade is difficult; the official frequently exercised his own moral judgement in deciding which container loads of clothing might be genuinely charitable. He had recently permitted a container load of European women's clothing to go to Assam, as it was well known that women in the tea plantations wore skirts and blouses unlike those in other regions of India. A deputation from a Sri Lankan Buddhist Police organisation was similarly allowed to send clothing to Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala, but a Swami who left as I entered the room had just been refused permission to send imported women's clothing to Bihar - as culturally inappropriate garments, the official knew that they were more likely to be diverted to the black market once the dispensation was issued. The inland depot in Delhi allows approximately only 12 container loads of clothing per year.

What is of interest to this chapter is an alternative option, whereby used woollen clothing can also be legally sold as a fibre commodity in the form of 'rags'. Imported rags are a permitted commodity that attracts a tariff of only 40%. India has insufficient wool to meet her needs, and woollen rags are allowed to fuel the recycling industry known as "shoddy" manufacturing, now located in the Punjab. In order to try and control illegal imports of wearable garments, the Indian government (amongst others) insists that all used clothing is slashed by large machines wielding fiendishly sharp rotating blades before packaging for export by the West, creating a product generically known as 'mutilated hosiery'.

³ Information regarding legal requirements, import tax and customs was obtained through an interview with an anti-smuggling official in Customs at the Inland container Depot in Delhi. Additional material, often conflicting in detail, derives from about a dozen interviews with old clothes importers and "shoddy" manufacturers. Details were correct at time of fieldwork in summer 2000 but may have altered subsequently.

These clothes are then exported either in vacuum-packed plastic wrapped in bales of approximately 350kg, or loose bales of 500 or 1000kg. About fifty to sixty 350kg, or forty-five 500kg bales fit into the average 40 foot long shipping container, making each one weigh between 18 and 22 metric tonnes. The key area for tariff trickery and the maximising of profit lies in passing off imported containers of wearable used clothes as ‘mutilated hosiery’ to customs officials at the docks, thereby avoiding the need for impossible-to-obtain licenses and high tariffs.

The official told a cautionary tale of trying too hard to tackle the problem. In Calcutta in the late 1990s, a backlog of 400 containers had accumulated, all garments illegally declared as mutilated hosiery. The garments were vacuum packed, so that as customs officials check bales by cutting them open, the contents expand and they occupy greater and greater amounts of space. This puts off a full scale check on all imports. Even though the usable clothing discovered was impounded, an amnesty had to be declared to allow the dealers to remove their vastly enlarged commodity, which was physically clogging up the warehouses and docksides. Clothing’s very nature seems to lend itself to such secretive, underhand transformations during its processing. Although cloth’s vulnerability permits it to be slashed, when squashed into layers of flat textile in a bale, the shape and potential of garments are hidden and the cuts remain invisible. The clothes constantly threaten to suddenly spill out from their vacuum-packed environment and reveal themselves as impostors, still whole and ready to be slipped on once more.

Second-hand clothing tends to move in and out of various markets which operate on both sides of the law, and it is difficult to be sure of exact quantities, values and trajectories as they are traded. As imports are legal in all the countries bordering India but not in India itself, cross-border smuggling is also a real problem, and many of the smaller dealers’ families originate in Nepal and Dharamsala, north India, where Tibetan refugees stockpile clothing given to them by Western tourists for later resale in India. These independent dealers operate on the basis of extended family networks, where key members establish bases in large cities such as Delhi and younger members are used to expand the markets in which they sell. Many informants also mentioned the practice of diverting charitable aid relief destined for Bangladesh through to India; one claimed that the whole illegal trade began on the Bangladeshi and Thai borders.

The main business centre for dealing in old clothing in Delhi is Azad market, established after Independence largely to deal with auctioning off government surplus, and lines of shops still sell off uniforms, boots, equipment, tyres, tents and the ubiquitous red and blue striped floor mats. Many importers claimed the highest profit to be obtained from imported used textiles is from buying clothing of reasonable quality and selling it on as garments; they are adamant that such clothing is needed by the poor, who cannot afford to buy new Indian clothing, thus adding a positive moral dimension to their illegal trade. It seems there is never enough used Indian clothing in the market and its quality is very low by the time it has been thrown out. According to them, an apparent ‘craze’ for foreign things is much less of a consideration than abject poverty, and demand is high. However, at the local suburban weekly markets where such clothing is sold to customers, no attempt is made to remove the brightly coloured paper thrift store labels attached to most of the clothing in the U.S. and Canada. The exotic origin of the clothes was important to their marketing, although few would be able to read the labels - one trader enthusiastically sang out ‘foreign’ every minute or two to attract buyers⁴.

In Azad market, many, if not most, importers are undoubtedly operating in the black market, although some claim to be solely rag importers. In a rabbit warren of cupboard offices in an old covered market, business men sit surrounded by phones and towers of plastic covered bales of clothing, small boys keeping up a constant flow of *chai*, sweet milky tea. Smaller bales, neatly strapped, have their origins emblazoned across them: “CANN-AMM Best in Used American/Canadian clothing”, complete with flags and national colours. These dealers use such bales as samples, maintaining huge godowns (warehouses) in the city outskirts. Networks extend across India (Calcutta, Chennai, Mumbai), and through to the UK and the USA; many Indians living in the West are increasingly acting as agents in the old clothing trade, and along the US Eastern Seaboard many of the traditionally Jewish firms are now owned or operated by Indians.

It is clear that in this underhand trade the importers and dealers are often outsiders, of diverse origins and traditions, and the trade appears to develop as new waves of economic migrants enter the business. As a trade dealing in polluted waste, it is shunned by the higher Hindu castes, yet offers an opportune starting point for those with little to invest. There is a

⁴ *Bit about the middle-class buyer*

minimal cross-over with the dealers in used Indian clothing, and the systems of collecting, processing and importing second-hand clothing and waste products remain separate from the resale of Indian clothing or the export of products made from saris. The main trade in imported clothing on a large-scale is in the hands of Punjabi Sikhs and former refugees from Partition, and more recently the Tibetans and Nepalese.

Many dealers in Azad market make a good profit by buying up rags in vast quantities. Until 1988-1989, only mill owners (as the end users) could import rags, but a policy was then introduced of issuing 'Open General Licenses', so middlemen can now operate legally and profitably. Approximately 90% of woollen rags are imported via Calcutta, the rest through Chennai and Mumbai. A pair of Sikh brothers works in the family firm in Azad market, importing 'mutilated hosiery' from the USA. They buy up bales of rags at 25 to 50 cents/kg CIF (Cost, Insurance and Freight), then have to pay 40% import duty on them. They make only 2-3 Rs/kg profit, but turnover is very high. They import between 100 and 150 containers a year, and send them straight from the Bombay docks to the recycling factories. Occasionally one of the brothers travels to the USA, but mainly they use agents and family contacts.

The Punjabi shoddy manufacturing industry

Textile recycling originated in the Yorkshire Dales at the turn of the 19th century with the development of the 'pulling process' whereby woollen fibres can be reclaimed by shredding textiles and turned into 'shoddy' yarn. This yarn is then re-spun and subsequently used for weaving or knitting. This description outlines the potential products of multiple recycling in the UK:

A woollen jumper which lasts seven years can be recycled into a woollen coating fabric, which can be made into an overcoat that is good for perhaps ten more years. The discarded overcoat can then go on to become a blanket, which can again yield service for ten years. The blanket can then be recycled as filling for furniture or bedding or perhaps as the insulation or soundproofing in a motor car. So a wool fibre, starting life on the back of a sheep, can have a useful life of 50 years before nothing more can be done with it. (Smosarski 1995: 113-114).

Demand for recycled fibres has reduced in the UK since the 1960s, 'due to the development of lighter-weight waterproof fabrics, the need for fewer military uniforms since

abolition of National Service, and the increased use of inferior synthetics'.⁵ Yet countries such as India utilise the technology to make up for a lack of indigenous raw materials and an inability to purchase new wool internationally at affordable prices. The export of used Western clothing for the shoddy industry is arguably an international trade in waste products, but those involved deny this definition and conceive of it differently. The 'Basel Convention on the Control of Trans-boundary Movements of Hazardous Waste and Their Disposal' (United Nations Environmental Programme) regulates the export of toxic waste to developing countries, and calls for its environmentally sound management.⁶ It classifies second-hand textiles as waste, but allows their export as they are on a special 'Green List'. Textile recyclers in the mid 1990s were indignant that their products were classed as waste at all, seeing them as an environmentally friendly resource for the world's poor and needy.⁷

One shoddy manufacturer, whose mill had been in business for nearly sixty years, explained that India began buying shoddy yarn from Italy in the 1950s and 1960s.⁸ In 1958, the first second-hand machines were imported from Milan to Bombay, and India began producing her own shoddy wool. In the 1970s labour unrest and increased management costs led to heavy expenses, and the factories closed down. Business shifted to the Punjabi plains, and was established firmly in Amritsar and latter Panipat in 1975. A few hours drive north of Delhi, Panipat is now the major centre for the recycling of mutilated hosiery in India, with two to three hundred mills processing shoddy from old clothing, and associated industries in Amritsar and Ludhiana.

As I was passed through networks of importers, agents, dealers, manufacturers and distributors during fieldwork, it became apparent that both the complexity of the system, based on blood ties and personal contacts, and the expansive entrepreneurial spirit of the individual players creates a complicated web of business relationships. Each dealer appeared

⁵ *Textiles & The Environment - Recycling* EIU/Special Report 1991.

⁶ see <http://www.basel.int/pub/basics.html#intro>. (accessed 20.02.03). This is the official website of the Secretariat of the Basel Convention, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Although hazardous waste was originally defined as waste 'toxic, poisonous, explosive, corrosive, flammable, ecotoxic and infectious', a later amendment agreed to ban, by 31 December 1997, the export of wastes intended for recovery and recycling (Decision II/12).

⁷ *Materials Recycling Week* February 10th 1995.

⁸ In 1974, Ginsburg was told by a dealer in Deptford that the shoddy trade had previously shifted from Yorkshire to Italy (1980, fn.67).

eager to take risks and to develop opportunities, securing the best deals in obtaining the raw materials and developing saleable products. Thus major importers one year became buyers from other importers the next, mills were set up by brothers, uncles and cousins to pool resources or diversify products, and relatives were sent abroad to secure the supply chain as agents for others on a commission basis.

Processing the raw materials

The processes of manufacturing shoddy yarn are to a large extent determined by the actual garments available, their fibre content, and ultimately the technological requirements for their transformation.

There are three main grades of 'woollen' clothing imported into India:⁹

1. 'Commercial All Wool' (CAW). 70-80% wool hosiery, i.e. jumpers, scarves and hats. [50c/kg].
2. 'Acrylic Loose Knits'. 100% synthetic hosiery, i.e. jumpers. [32c/kg].
3. 'Original Woollen Rag' (OWR). 70-80% wool cloth, i.e. old coats. [21c/kg].

When buying clothing in the international market place, the reputation of the source companies in the West is very important in judging the probable fibre quality and colour of the bales' contents. Good companies in the West are known to employ careful sorters and graders: they have a first and a second grading, and do not mix fibres. The names of firms such as 'Allied', 'International' (Texas) and 'H.B.' (Bradford, UK) act as brands which guarantee quality; for example 'H.B.' is known for the best quality English wool coats and jumpers, which cost more than the Canadian equivalents.

One dealer explained that buyers favoured clothes from the US and UK as they were generally new and 'bright' shades, whereas German clothing tended to be poorer quality and 'dull' shades. 'Bright' means intense, such as royal blue, while 'dull' can refer to pastel shades as well as greys, browns and olive greens.¹⁰ The purity of colour in the used clothing

⁹ Prices as of March 2000, in U.S. cents per kilogram after Customs, Insurance and Freight (CIF) at Bombay docks.

¹⁰ Buyers cannot choose colours, and are reliant on what they find in the bales. If certain shades are fashionable in India, such as camel was in 1999, the recyclers cannot provide them in any quantity; their poor clientele have

is extremely important; the fibres are not re-dyed, and the purer and brighter the colours obtainable in the raw material, the more valuable the end product. However, the Original Woollen Rag from northern hemisphere winter coats is overwhelmingly comprised of dark greys, browns, greens and blacks, in checks, tweeds and so on, with only a few groups of bright shades. Manufacturers with old equipment can make a profit by using these materials, but the end products are unsurprisingly sludgy colours and receive the lowest market rates.

As the bales are cut open on the warehouse floors (Fig. 2), this mutilated hosiery is sorted further into a range of “colour families”, eg peacock, rani (hot pink), mehendi (henna), American beauty (a bright red shade), saffron and checked. Larger colour families were next sorted into sub-groups of light pastel, dark and bright shades; the more rigorous the colour sorting, the purer the eventual result. In addition were the ‘fancy’ groups, multi-coloured checks and tweeds that were the one exception that were occasionally re-dyed black once sorted. The huge piles of clothing were then stripped of all their non-woollen fibre components by women workers: labels, buttons, zips, press studs, leather patches and trimmings, shoulder pads and linings. Buttons were burnt off, while mainly synthetic coat and jacket linings were removed and bought by the local *kabariwale* (rubbish men) and periodically carted away on overflowing trucks. Approximately 90% of Commercial All Wool is recovered, with only 10% burnt or sold as *katran* (rags). The clothing is then cut into pieces about 50cm square by the same women, who sit on the floor using traditional vegetable cutters (Fig. 3).

Interestingly, the one by-product for which there is no use are the garment labels, which are perhaps the most obvious evidence of the transformation of values which is taking place. Once advertising a brand name which was vital to the value of the original garment, this information is now worthless, or in fact detracts from the re-evaluation process. These labels provide the material evidence for the history of the 20th century trans-national trade in new clothing, charting the course of fibre sources, designs, manufacture and retail across the globe. But as grubby exuviae snipped from a garment collar they bear witness to the archaeology of wardrobe turn-outs, as seen from the archaic typefaces, logos and colonial terms such as ‘Manufactured in the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong’ which have lingered for decades in Western closets. Also found are scrappy paper labels from garments

to take what comes. Yet the huge scale of the trade results in a wide array of colours mixed in bales, so bulk buying allows for a degree of control over the design of end products.

that failed to attract a potential buyer in American thrift shops, which reveal the over-expectant second-hand value given in dollars and cents.

The clothes are then broken down into a tangled mess of fibres and soaked overnight in a solution to which is added diesel or Mobil oil, to enable them to pass through the machinery better and stop static electricity building up. The fibres are teased, carded and spun into new thread: the antiquated machinery used is itself recycled from Italy, while the threads are wound onto spools made from old newspapers. The purer the wool content in used clothing and the longer the fibre staple, the better quality it is and a stronger, finer thread can be produced by recycling. The oldest recycling machines can only produce poor quality, thick, heavy wool products with a short staple, hence returning a lower profit on the finished goods, while newer machinery can produce a finer yarn. Woollen yarn is classified into 'counts': the higher the count, the finer the yarn; the quality of the end product therefore depends upon both the raw material and the technology available.

Different production methods and end products are centred in different areas, although not exclusively. Panipat manufacturers can achieve only an 8½ to 10 count thread as their machines are the oldest, in Ludhiana they make 10, 12 and 14 count threads, in Amritsar 12 to 13 count.¹¹ Panipat is largely known for its cheap shoddy blankets and shawls made from Original Woollen Rag, Ludhiana is a centre for synthetic hosiery and knits products from recycled Acrylic Loose Knits, while Amritsar weaves better quality woollen cloth from Commercial All Wool to be made up into clothing.

Panipat: blankets and shawls

Companies in Panipat have been manufacturing blankets for the poor for the last 100 years, but only using shoddy thread since the 1970s. The lowest grades of recycled threads are hand-woven into blankets on upright looms. Ten blankets are woven at a time, then cut afterwards. The woven cloth is then wet with water, and rolled in 'milling' machines and dried: the pile is then raised through steam treatment, the steam generated by boilers stoked with rice husks. The resulting blankets are semi-felted and 'fluffy'.

¹¹ In Bradford, England it is 16-20, and the highest quality still comes from Italy, at 20 count.

These blankets are of low quality, in plain and simple monochrome and not expected to last. The plainest, one season blankets are purchased by Aid agencies such as the UNHCR and the Indian government for disaster relief, and sent to Orissa, Bangladesh, and further afield to Africa. Each one approximately Rs 60.¹² Ironically, the clothing given to charity in the West may be helping to keep refugees and disaster victims warm, but through a circuitous route few would imagine, via the recycling of their constituent fibres (see also Hansen 2000).

Catering for the very lowest end of the market, another mill produced very poor quality men's shawls, *lohi*, in a range of grimy camel colours, from Original Woollen Rag (in this case usually old coats). Costing about Rs 80 each, they measured about 54" by 90". The same firm wove bolts of cloth from which were cut clothing such as blazers, jackets and types of winter tunics, *phiren*, all favoured in the mountainous northern states of Uttar Pradesh, Kashmir and so on. All of these products, the blankets, shawls and clothing, were thick and gritty to the touch, with a greasy texture and unpleasant smell. It suddenly became clear that at no stage, from being ejected from the Westerner's wardrobe, via travelling across the globe, being shredded and re-woven, were these garments ever washed; the human dirt and environmental pollution encountered along the way literally clung to their very fibres. The mill owners were sure that the poor Himalayans who bought them would never notice; in any case, they could never afford pure virgin wool.

Using better quality yarn, brightly coloured shades (often fluorescent) can be woven alongside darker ones, in bold stripes and chequered designs made locally on computers. These are exported to Russia and other developing countries, or sold in India, each fetching between Rs 100 – 150. Some shopkeepers order in bulk and distribute them via *pheriwale*. These are travelling salesmen who buy up a bale or two of 30-35 blankets from the shop, and take 10 or 15 around with them everyday, going door-to-door. They make perhaps Rs 10 profit on each one.

I purchased one single blanket made from Original Woollen Rag for Rs 250; its plastic wrapper had 'Product of India' proudly emblazoned across it. Another smaller baby's blanket in fluffed acrylic-wool mix similarly declared itself to be 'Indian'; it had a vase with

¹² During 1999-2000, £1 was equivalent to approximately 65-67 Indian Rupees (Rs).

flowers across it, a common design found across the northern Indian (Fig. 4). Less obviously grimy and gritty to the touch, both still possessed a certain greasiness and whiff of mechanical oil about them, yet it is unlikely that a middle-class consumer would ever realise how they were actually made, and would have no idea of the origin of the materials: the product has been completely ‘Indianised’. In fact, it has been suggested that such smells could, ironically, be reminiscent of dry cleaning fluid, a signal of the opposite condition of cleanliness and purity.¹³ The higher the fibre quality and colour purity, the more elaborate the designs; the best blankets made from Commercial All Wool can be sold for Rs 400 to 500 each, but these tend to be made in Amritsar. One manufacturer estimated that only 1% of the population would be able to afford blankets made from pure virgin wool from Australia or New Zealand, which retail at over Rs 1,000.

The middle classes profess it to be unthinkable to openly purchase second-hand cloth in the market unless one is very poor.¹⁴ Yet unknown to them, some of the better quality ‘new’ products on sale are, paradoxically, profoundly old and truly dirty. For the very fibres of many apparently new blankets and woollen goods are, in fact, recycled from imported woollen clothing, a fact which is completely concealed. The successful recycling of such material to a wider market requires traders to skilfully navigate such customers’ value systems through various strategies of transformation and marketing. Whilst other recycled goods are admired as evidence of thrift or artistic creativity since being taken up by the West (Cerny & Ceriff 1996; Coote, Morton & Nicholson 2000) the origins of these textiles are all but invisible to the eye.

Ludhiana: knitted hosiery

Ludhiana is a centre for the manufacture of knitted synthetics; most of the raw materials used are new, but there are some smaller manufacturers using recycled shoddy to make clothing. The end product is equally reliant on both the available technology, the quality of yarn required, and the price of new versus shoddy thread on the international market.

¹³ Mukulika Banerjee, pers. comm.

¹⁴ It is highly likely that some middle-class informants did in fact buy imported used clothing in secret; the concept that such underhand behaviour existed was firmly established.

The hand knitting machines in smaller units use two threads at once and require mixed wool/synthetic threads to strengthen the garment. Adding 10% of polyester thread also adds a softness and lustre to the jumper - makers were keen to show the 'sparkle' it added to the otherwise drab thread. But manufacturing costs must be carefully controlled, and polyester thread is usually much more expensive. However, when the international price of crude oil sank to \$10 a barrel, polyester yarn suddenly fell, reaching rock bottom in 1999. Shoddy was only a little less, and could not compete unless prices for mutilated rags also fell. The world market in mutilated hosiery is therefore linked to the international oil market: the value of an old sweater linked to international politics through materials and technology.

Jumpers were also never washed and had the same greasy, gritty feel to them as the Panipat blankets. The cheapest combination of colours is 'air force' and 'light grey'. More expensive colours are those which have been dyed darker to hide imperfections - black, maroon, red, navy and coffee. The garment designs were copied from larger manufacturers who in turn got their inspiration from fashion shows and magazines. The jumpers were of such poor quality that only 5-10% were used within India, while 70% was exported to Bangladesh and the Middle East for re-export.

Amritsar: woollen suiting

The woollen cloth produced in Amritsar is altogether finer in quality, and all the mills are competing in the international export trade with the West rather than the world's poorest markets. Amritsar tends to have newer machinery, but above all, it is claimed, the softest water. Several manufacturers claimed that this is one of the most important reasons why Panipat makes such poor quality cloth that it is impossible to export it. The only international competition for the Amritsar businessmen comes from Korea, who entered the market in the mid-1990s, and more recently China. Some of the mill owners were trying to break into the international market for virgin wool products, hoping to change the global impression of Indian woollen products as inferior. By investing in newer technology, they only now needed to import wool from Australia and New Zealand to achieve the same standards as Italy.

But the majority of mills produce high quality shoddy suiting which is then sent to Delhi to be made up into clothing. One unit had a carding machine from Belgium which produced 12 to 14 count threads. This was then woven into suiting on four Polish looms, which used punch cards to create tweed designs. The selvages were decorated with phrases,

slogans and brand names of modernity rather than the manufacturers name¹⁵; “Millenium 2000”, “Heritage Club” and, in tribute to Rupert Murdoch’s pan-Asian satellite TV channel, “Star Plus”. It is clear that simple categories of ‘new’ and ‘recycled’ bear no relation to the extremely complex strategies employed by manufacturers, traders and retailers to transform ‘waste’ textile materials of all kinds into saleable ‘new’ commodities.

At Diamond Woollen Mills, a wide range of colourful cheques and ‘tartans’ were manufactured. Their cloth was sold to Delhi garment manufacturers to fulfil export orders; the colours and designs were often determined by the buyers from abroad. The company made 10,000m per month, working 24 hours a day in shifts to satisfy demand. Unlike cheaper products, the cloth was washed with detergent during the finishing process, and had lost the unpleasant pungency of other examples. This cloth is in fact made into clothing that is then exported back to the West as fashion garments. Coming full circle, one manufacturer told me he had been amazed when, on a business trip to London, he had seen a red tartan jacket for sale in Oxford Street made from 100% Indian shoddy cloth.

Conclusion

The recycling of imported Western clothing in India shares many of the characteristics of strategies utilised in the recycling of Indian clothes. Knowledge about, and preservation of, signs of the previous individual owner is not given a positive value, in fact signs of the body have to be removed but in an unusually brutal manner (Gregson & Crewe 2000). The manufacture of extremely cheap blankets and jumpers from shoddy for the very poor and disaster victims reflects an economy of technology which adds value to cast-out garments, giving them a new lease of life for a year or two at best. However, in order to manufacture a product attractive to the middle classes, it is again necessary to conceal the second-hand, foreign origin of the material, destroying it completely and throwing away the very labels and fashion trimmings that gave the garment its value in the West. This effacement of former lives creates a new exchange value located in the shoddy fibres; once stamped with a ‘Product of India’ strap-line, the blanket has a new value as desirable commodity. The two extremes encompass the approaches needed to add value to ‘rubbish’

¹⁵ The edge of a fabric that is woven so that it will not fray or unravel. Selvedges usually display the name of the manufacturer, sometimes the name of the design, the fibre content or the country of origin.

for different consumers: one focuses on the foreign origins of cloth, whilst the other denies it completely.

These examples reveal the hidden, often subversive flow of goods between India and the developed world, characterised by disintegration, disposal, and destruction on the one hand, and by reclamation, re-integration, and renewal on the other. The materiality of cloth is essential for this translation of form, for it is in ambiguities of its material properties, its colour, its strength and fragility, its capacity to absorb, to reflect, to be cut and re-stitched that its transformative value lies. It is by variously utilising qualities such as colour, fibre characteristics, pattern, sheen and texture, whilst being rid of the form of the clothing, its wear, tear, holes and stains that translations occur.

These facets of materiality enable cloth to hold the relationality of people and things within their very fibres, and are not dependent on the circumstances of a garment's cut, style or subservience to the vagaries of fashion. Such qualities are also the necessary prerequisites for the creation of exchange value through destruction and the renewal of perceptions of self, identity and sociality at all levels. Clothing is acknowledged to be an essential part of the construction of an image of the self for projection outwards to the social world, and a locus of embodied meaning through the social relations in which its production and consumption are implicated. However, in my work I argue that the shedding of unwanted garments permits a renewal of self and personhood whilst creating a new resource for exchange. At the level of the person, this destruction results in the shattering of the image of self held within those fibres, a form of iconoclasm at odds with iconic notions of identity described in many studies of clothing and ascribed to certain fashions, cuts and styles. The manipulation of the market through the transformation of such fibres results in constantly shifting sets of relationships between entrepreneurs, who rely on invisibility and secrecy to produce a valued new product from the heaps of unwanted stuff which they surreptitiously collect. And as the value with which they are able re-inscribe cloth increases, so does their own social worth.

Similarly, at the level of the nation state, such interconnected transformations stand in contrast to stereotypical images of India's cheap export garments or highly prized hand woven silk saris, or of the black market, perceived to be overflowing with second hand goods imported from the developed world. Despite the images of nationhood and international relationships constructed through formal trade deals such as the Basle Convention which operate around the concept of political entities and geographical

boundaries, the investigation into the materiality of the used clothing trade reveals a complex pattern of ravelling and unravelling relationships, an intricate network of social relations formed, broken and patched up alongside the cloth in which they deal, ever ready to respond to challenges in the market to create new hybrid products whose origins remain deeply obscured.

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Figures:

Fig 1. Waghri women spread their kitchen wares out on the ground to tempt passing women into bartering their old clothes in return.

Fig 2. A bale of old clothes from the UK waits to be sorted at the factory in Panipat.

Fig 3. Once the clothing has been sorted by colour, women cut it up into small squares.

Fig 4. A baby's blanket woven from recycled thread and sold in Indian markets.

Contributor's blurb:

Lucy Norris is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Anthropology, University College London, where she was awarded her PhD. Her research investigates the life-cycle of clothing in contemporary urban India, focussing on practices of disposal, recycling and the transformation of clothing into hybrid products in the global market. She is currently preparing a manuscript of her PhD thesis and devising a collaborative exhibition looking at related themes.