

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Making Designs on Fashion: Producing Contemporary Indian Aesthetics

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of
Philosophy in Anthropology

by

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2015

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Sherry B. Ortner, Chair

This dissertation is about the making of the Indian fashion designer and highlights how the birth of the industry has fashioned new subjects and subjectivities. It traces constitutive shifts and tensions in the fashion industry over the last three decades, including the rise of bridal wear or couture, the appropriation of craft and resistances to it, and the return of ready-to-wear production via e-commerce. I argue that the professional identity of the fashion designer was crafted in opposition to the low-skilled *darzi* (tailor) and distinct from the ‘traditional’ craftsman with low cultural capital. However, while the designer’s identity was originally celebrated as modern, creative, and entrepreneurial, paradoxically, the most successful designers are those who appropriate and prioritize craft above his or her own skill. To make this argument, this dissertation engages with, and contributes to, scholarship on class and caste in India, anthropological literature on fashion and other creative industries, as well as work on kinship and family.

Despite efforts to mark fashion as a distinct, new professional field with the creation of a national institute of fashion (NIFT), I argue that relations of inequality that marked the industry

from the outset continue to persist in new ways. While Indian fashion presents itself as good for the new middle class, this project continues to serve historically and culturally elite designers. For many new, professionally trained, middle-class designers, this signals the failure of fashion as a liberatory project for the middle class. While historical structures of power continue to remain important, I explore the emergence of self-reflexive actors who can navigate the industry while critiquing it. I suggest that these subjectivities provide new ways to think about how middle-class Indians understand and maneuver the multiple effects of economic liberalization.

The structure of the dissertation enacts the trajectory of producing a fashion collection. Each chapter highlights discrepancies between what is imagined and what ends up being produced.

The dissertation of Meher Varma is approved.

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2015

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Acknowledgements

My acknowledgments begin with recognitions to those in Los Angeles, where graduate school and graduate life “happened.” My first thanks are reserved for my advisor, Dr. Sherry Ortner. I consider myself very lucky to be your student. Thank you for all your time, patience and encouragement through these last seven years. Akhil Gupta, you have been an important inspiration and teacher. I thank you and Purnima Mankekar for believing in this subject right from the outset. Your comments on this dissertation helped me view the subject in new and complex ways. Thank you for always raising the bar. Saloni Mathur – technically my “outside” member but really one of the most important intellectuals to guide this dissertation. Thank you for all your work and help. Sondra Hale, thank you for your teachings on postcolonial studies, and for being a wonderful support to many students including myself.

Next, I would like to thank my colleagues and friends in Los Angeles: Hannah Reiss, Cassandra Markoe, Veena Hampapur, Ellen Sharp, Ronan McRory, Adam Fish, Rayed Kheder, Janell Rothberg, Jessa Farquhar, Konstantinos and Rezzan, Julia MM, Sanjay Grover, Gaurav Singh, Usha Dean– I consider you are all my American family. Thank you for sharing all my joys, troubles, sorrows, drinks and most of all – everyday experiences.

Outside LA, I'd like to thank Anthony Acciavetti and Michael Ritter for your edits on this dissertation. Tereza Kuldova: fellow scholar of Indian fashion, you are a source of inspiration. This now brings me to the people in Delhi, where as I have said several times through this work, fashion is alive, kicking and shaping some of the lives I respect most.

Vidyun Singh: your dedication to the industry was the first time I noticed the seriousness that was behind the scenes of Indian fashion. Thank you for always letting me do what I needed to in order to learn more about this world you helped build decades ago. Asha Kocchar: Thank you for your generosity and friendship. Both of you have taught me the value of experience.

Designers are the stuff of this project and the people after my heart. Your work remains a source of fascination to me, and I thank you all for allowing me to explore your world.

Gaurav Gupta – my intrigue does not fit in this book. I cannot thank you enough for agreeing to let me be your fly-on-the-wall (or try). I have learned so much from your methods, thoughts, “mistakes,” and constant self-questioning. Navkirat and Vijen – thank you for including me in your beautiful family and everyday theatre.

Special thanks to Ruchika Sachdeva – I respect your sense of integrity immensely. I look forward to what you will accomplish. Aneeth Arora – I’ve thought about you as somewhat of a hero; thank you for teaching me that fashion can be about love and doing something good for people. Namrata Joshipura and Vivek Sood – thank you for believing in my work and your honesty. Sanjay Garg – thank you for always adding a dimension of complexity to everything! I look forward to what we can do together.

Both casual and deep conversations with other “industry people” – a dreaded term for some – including Narresh Kuckreja, Sujata Assomull, Shefalee Vasudev, Bandana Tewari, Ritu and Amrish Kumar, Manish Arora, Jyotika Jhalani, Malika Verma, David Abraham, Kevin Negil, Sonam Dubal, Peter D’Ascoli, Anavila Misra, Arjun Saluja, Prateek Jain and Gautam Seth, Sumant Jayakrishnan, Asha Baxi, Maapu, Rahul Bhattacharya, Nonita Kalra, Pareina Thapar, Narendra Kumar, Shagun Khanna, Payal Pratap, Anu Malathy, Rathi Vinay Jha, Akshay Tyagi, Caroline Young, Sabine Heller, Priyal Bhartia, Gautam Sinha, Angelique Raina and so many others have added nuance to this work. Thank you for your introductions, help, advice and tips as you helped me navigate the world of Indian fashion. Aashti Bhartia and Mayank Mansingh Kaul – an extra thanks to you for always, always being there for me.

Thank you to all the professors and students at NIFT. One professor in particular –Vandana Narang – provided crucial insight to this text. I am grateful to all of you for engaging with me and making room for my scholarship in your busy lives.

My work in the factory was made possible by Kriti and Anushree: thank you “girls,” for stopping whatever it was you were doing to explain things to me. To all the Masterjis, craftsmen, finishing ladies, “runners,” and factory workers: you all who showed me what high fashion is all about; thank you for sharing whatever you had with me, even if it was a few sips of tea.

Finally, just as this dissertation has been committed to exposing the behind-the-scenes life of fashion, there are multiple backstage actors who mark every page of this work. My final thanks are reserved for them. Friends and relatives not directly in the world of fashion – Diya Nanda, Shiv Singh (the original fashionista), Ashwin Jain, Pri Shewakramani, Niyaz Liaq, Sukhmani Bedi, Mansi Poddar, The Vadera Girls, Puja Setia, Sid Khanna, and long distance pal Elspeth Day—you supported me unconditionally. Karishma Jhalani – you are an amazing friend and writing companion. I look forward to your incredible films. Doctor Jassal: I thank you for the title of this work. Sahil Vasudeva, I sprung this project upon you unannounced, and your patience leaves me astounded. Thank you for your care, companionship and for teaching me that all good things take time.

Dad – look I finished something! Thank you for always pushing me, believing in my own path and giving me everything you could. Your wisdom, sharp-as-a-razor mind and love will always keep me going. Mommy – my personal heroine, and the one behind it all –our very own ‘Mother India.’ I share all the credit this work may get with you. Between us, after producing two PhDs, you are the real doctor.

Zulfi and Zuma – my most dedicated companions. You never let me feel a day of loneliness through the writing up process. Priya – your magic in the kitchen and friendship through the years has made your second daughter a doctor. I hope you are proud.

And last but most important – Saiba Varma: you are the best anthropologist, friend and sister I could ask for. I thank you for guiding me through this discipline and teaching me a whole new way to think about the world. You have provided me with a new set of eyes, a language, and a gift. In return, please make do with my less fantastic return present – this work is for you. I know it will never be good enough, but if it passes at least some of your tests, I'll be more satisfied than you'd probably advise (for my own good, of course).

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INTRODUCTION

Be Open: A Closed Door

In February 2013, a couriered package, neatly sealed with gold ribbon and containing a weighty brochure, arrived on my doorstep. A message printed on handmade paper invited me to “BE OPEN...Made in India,” an exclusive event sponsored by foreign embassies, the Ministry of Textile, and the Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI). The event’s name, which appeared all over the packaging, was meant to elicit a sense of surprise.

On the evening of the event, I went with a few of my informants, who had also been invited. As we made our way to the venue at the Indira Gandhi Museum of Art, Manu Rao,*¹ a swimwear designer, expressed his envy at the government’s openness to fashion designers: “I’ve tried to do an off-site fashion show in so many public places and it’s never worked out.” There was a brief silence in the car before Amina, a senior stylist working at *Vogue India* and who was sitting in the front, changed the topic. She asked Manu if he knew about CAPSULE, a global trade fair held in Paris for young, ready-to-wear designers. As we got out of the car and Manu parked, she told me that his labeling of this event as “fashion” revealed he was behind the times. She also found his assumption about the government’s support of fashion naïve.

By the time we arrived at the parking lot of the usually quiet museum, it was filled with BMWs, Audis, and other expensive, foreign cars. Within minutes of entering the museum, I ran into what seemed a curated cross-section of my informants: professors from the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), designers, friends, and students of fashion. Sunil Sethi, the president of FDCI—a tall, lean man with a distinguished salt and pepper moustache, jokingly referred to as the Prime Minister of Fashion by designers—thanked me for coming. When I expressed gratitude for

¹ Name changed. Through this dissertation, I will provide a “*” to note when I am using a pseudonym.

the invite, he emphatically replied: “We need to get India up there!” as if he was having a different conversation altogether.

The sprawling museum had been segmented, each area occupied by a well-established fashion, product, or light designer. Among the displays was a collection of handmade Kerala bath towels, organic hand-woven baby clothes, and a *khadi*² sari made by Sethi’s daughter, then a NIFT student. Steaming hot *chai* was passed around in clay cups, which some commented was a refreshing change from the bad wine usually served at fashion events. The BE OPEN guide map referred to the exhibiting designers as “Indian craftsmen” and applauded their commitment to the sector.

About an hour later, Mr. Sethi asked everyone to attend a presentation in an adjoining room. As we scrambled to find seats, younger attendees were asked to get up and make way for senior industry members. First, a short film was shown about the Italian fashion house *Missoni*’s use of Indian craft and was followed by shots of village women laboriously hand stitching a *chikaankari*³ sari. The cameraman’s focus was fixed on the hands of the laborers, their dexterous fingers replacing their faces. The caption “Handmade in India” filled the bottom left corner of the screen.

When the film ended, a spotlight fell on the five-person panel. A middle-aged woman from California introduced herself as the first speaker. She opened with a question: “Why is the Indian craftsman’s stuff always so dirty?”⁴ Other presenters spoke about Indian craft versus fashion and the craftsman and the designer, always making an effort to distinguish them. Most declared that “craft [is] the best thing happening in Indian design today, with "authenticity," "handloom" and "textile" being used multiple times. Some of India’s top fashion designers were cited as exemplary saviors of Indian craftsmen. There was also some discussion about how the need to “go domestic” was urgent,

² *Khadi* is a term for handspun cloth in India. It is synonymous with Mahatma Gandhi’s *swadeshi* (self-reliance) movement.

³ *Chikaankari* is an embroidery style from Lucknow. The Chikan industry is the focus of Claire Wilkinson Weber’s dissertation (1999), which is arguably one of the most comprehensive studies of an Indian artisanal community to date. See also Kuldova (2013).

⁴ This commentator here perpetuates the stereotype that the bodies of Indian craftsmen are polluted. As Kuldova (in press; n.d.) discusses, the Indian luxury market depends upon their “sanitization.”

given China's production of *Kanjeevaram*⁵ saris. When one designer said he wanted to “stop living in an age where people were like machines and machines were like people,” everyone applauded and the discussion ended. No one uttered the words “bridal wear,” “ready-to-wear” “*prêt-à-porter*” or even, “fashion.”

While exiting, I heard multiple people congratulating Mr. Sethi on his “amazing” initiative. Many publications called BE OPEN the best gathering of the year. I briefly spoke to a Fashion Design professor from NIFT who urged me to phone her afterwards. She wanted to discuss how problematic the event was, but nonetheless complimented Mr. Sethi as she got into her car. Afterwards, I wrote a few questions down in my field notes: Did that count as a fashion event? Why was it so lavishly funded, and most importantly, why was no one using the terms “fashion” or “couture” to describe what Indian designers were producing? (Field Notes, February 9, 2013).

What is Indian Fashion and Couture?

The scene at BE OPEN represented a marked shift from the industry I had begun fieldwork in. When I started out in 2012, I felt as if I had arrived at the peak of a decade-long fashion boom. Brand launch parties, fashion shows, and store openings were weekly events that seemed to occupy the time of many people to whom I was connected. Even The Delhi Times—the daily tabloid supplement to the national, English-language daily *The Times of India*, my initial source of access to the fashion industry—provided me with complete fashion updates, close-ups of garments, and personal interviews with top designers throughout the year. Sometimes entire pages were devoted to something slightly out of the ordinary a designer wore.⁶ Aside from the number of fashion magazines and newspaper pages that featured news about Indian designers as celebrities, the Indian fashion press exalted the rise of the Indian couturier and the burgeoning bridal market he

⁵ A type of sari traditionally hand-woven in Tamil Nadu.

⁶ “Gaurav Gupta Says his Ring is from Pluto” is an example of this kind of article that appeared in the Delhi Times on June 5th 2104, and occupied half a page. On another occasion, designer Namrata Joshipura told me that a mainstream newspaper once did a feature about how she tripped on her laces at a party.

represented. Day after day, the glossiest newspaper pages were reserved for featuring exotic, shiny embroidery-filled *lenghas*, saris and sari-gowns that represented Indian couture. Often, the Indian couturier—usually a middle-aged, distinguished looking gentleman—was featured alongside this creation. In private circles, I heard about certain couturiers having to limit their loyalties to only one or two industrialist families for whom they would work exclusively.



Top designer Rohit Bal with his showstopper⁷ at Bridal Week, New Delhi 2013 (Indian Express 2013).

With these glamorous representations, it was often proclaimed that Indian fashion no longer suffered problems of derivation. In reference to this purported fashion boom, bridal designer Gautam Rakha once told me, “Now, India no longer looks to the West; rather, the West looks to India.”⁸ His statement was supported by the huge sums of money that upper-middle-class and elite families were pumping into buying couture for big Indian weddings, ensembles that rarely cost less than four lakhs a piece. Moreover, these outfits that were all loosely referred to as “statement pieces” were so called because they were not just conceptually advanced but were also garments that were reflective of the family’s class position. In other words, what the bride and her close female relatives wore through the three-to-four-day wedding celebrations was indicative of the family’s

⁷ In the Indian fashion show, the “showstopper” usually refers to a Bollywood celebrity who wears the designer’s most elaborate outfit. Showstoppers typically end the show, walking arm in arm with the couturier(e).

⁸ To emphasize the high (global) status of Indian couture, designers often told me that even the top French fashion house Hermes designed a sari collection in 2011.

socio-economic background.⁹ I quickly learned that for an upper-class bride, wearing “A Tarun(Tahilani)” or “A Rohit(Bal)” was a given, especially because she was expected to look like modern royalty.

Doing ethnography revealed the alternative undercurrents of this glamorous, linear, and progressive narrative. This dissertation highlights the gap between the public celebration of Indian fashion, couture, and its lived realities in post-liberalization India. This is a narrative that is marked by extreme highs and lows and successes and downfalls that together shape the story of Indian fashion. At the center of this drama is a puzzling problem which lies at the heart of Indian fashion: While the Indian designer has remained at the center of this spectacle of growth, glitz and development, Indian fashion has evolved to actually marginalize his role in production. Instead, the Indian craftsmen or *karigar* who was historically excluded from the formal establishment of ready-to-wear fashion has become equated with value. It is through centralizing his “work” or craft—mostly in the form of highly coveted and valuable handcrafted embroidery—that the industry claims its shift away from a Western, mass-produced, export industry to a successful, couture, and Indian market. Moreover, occluded in public celebrations of couture and the craftsman’s work is the initial reasons behind why the industry was set up. As many designers recall, going to The National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) through the late 1980s and early 1990s meant learning how to become creative producers of ready-to-wear¹⁰ Western garments for the export market. The contemporary emphasis on Indian couture and craft then makes the position of designers who were and continue to be trained in Western ready-to-wear fashion quite ambivalent. I show how this

⁹ Curiously, women from the same family often choose to wear the same designer in order to emphasize their collective identity as a family (See Chapter Two). However, the amount of “work” or heaviness of their outfits varies, depending on the female relative’s closeness to the bride. For example, if the bride has a sister, her outfit will typically be “heavier” than a cousin’s. To play on this, designer Jejum Gadi created a collection for Fashion Week in 2015 that he called “My Best Friend’s Wedding.” His collection featured lenghas that were slightly less embroidered than a bridal ensemble.

¹⁰ I use the terms ready-to-wear and prêt-à-porter (French translation) interchangeably.

ambivalence maps on to a question about India's economic liberalization of which Indian fashion as a Western, ready-to-wear market was considered a by-product.

Therefore, for many designers working today, behind the gleeful emergence of Indian couture—or the ostensible peak of Indian high fashion—is the rhetoric of accident or failure. Embedded in this rhetoric is the return of ready-to-wear fashion which until a few years ago, represented the antithesis of high fashion. Therefore, to highlight the discrepancy between how fashion is projected and what it means for designers, I make sense of why, for many successful designers, the present is a time to manage the designer label that was produced by what is often described as the haphazard journey of the industry, and consequently, India's economic liberalization. To borrow from the language of fashion producers, there is an issue with *finishing*—a problem that emerges after a product is technically complete, but when something is identified as missing; finishing is moreover, often attributed to a problem with the origin itself. I argue that this “problem” maps on to the gap between what Indian fashion meant and was set up for in the 1980s and where it has ended up. Through this dissertation, I highlight these reported problems of finishing to reflect on what the undelivered promises of Indian fashion are, and join important scholars like Akhil Gupta and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan (2011) in asking what liberalization has actually meant in the real, everyday lives of middle-class actors. As part of this questioning, I consider accusations of plagiarism, oversaturation, and mediocrity that many, including some who also identify themselves as successful couturiers, asked me to write about. I also show how the turn to bridal wear gives rise to historical essentialisms like, “Indian designers cannot make the perfect black suit nor the best little black dress,” or “Indian designers can only drape and not stitch,” comments which suggest that what designers are and were trained to do through the 1980s and 1990s did not work out. Moreover, for some established designers, the production of couture which demands the “work” of the craftsman more than the designer, and embroidery more than concept,

is a question about the professional Indian designer and why he exists, or is needed any longer. For many of the top designers I spoke with, the more the media made them into mini-celebrities, the emptier they felt inside.¹¹

However, I also show these sentiments of failure are not end points. Instead, I explore how both the rise of the Indian wedding market¹² and the backlash against this platform has produced multiple, alternative subjectivities. Most notably, I show how India's top designers or couturiers whom the Indian elite accuse of selling out and deserting a past authentic middle class in order to appeal to the elite are able to recast themselves as ethical; I show how this is most successful when they represent themselves as family businessmen who are simultaneously slightly alienated from, yet representative of their big and typically eponymous labels. This growth accompanies a shift in business practices that allows them to imagine their factories as homes, and their craftsmen as brothers. At other times, designers who are ambivalent about the economic success they have achieved develop subversive strategies to negotiate their identities within this system. As I show, this performance, encompassed by a term called madness, allows designers to negate dominant market tastes in their own sartorial choices, and downplay their labels as successful designers.¹³ However, I argue that this subversion is usually only possible for actors who were previously endowed with cultural capital or have experienced great amounts of success (Chapter Four). For much of the “new” and “emerging” middle-class India, the industry is still a glamorous space and being a designer remains a dream.

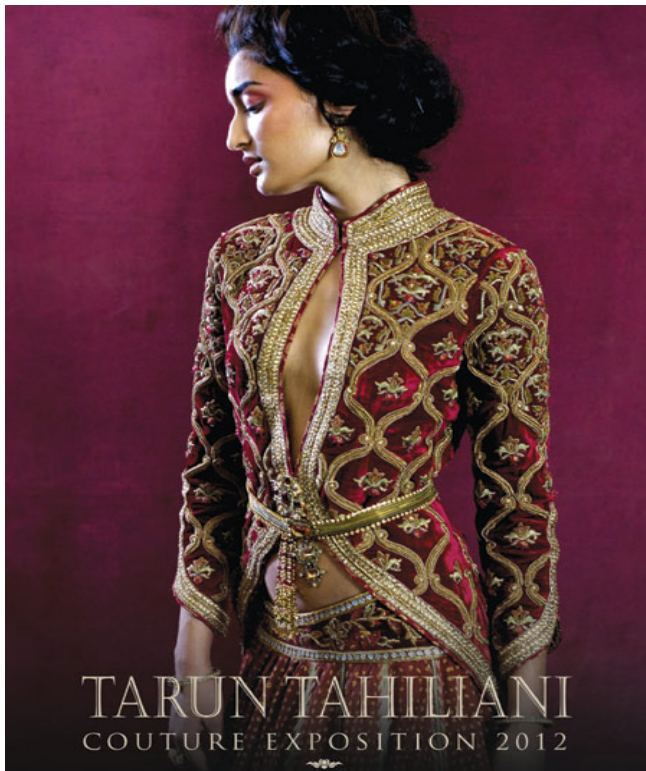
¹¹For example, in March 2015, I attended the pre-launch of Manish Arora's Couture collection in New Delhi. While casually conversing with Arora, an important fashion journalist interrupted us to congratulate him on “really raising the bar for couture in India.” Arora laughed, and responded: “The bar? What's the bar? You mean that thing over there?” He was comically pointing to the alcohol counter set up in the middle of the room.

¹²Tereza Kuldova's forthcoming book on Indian fashion (in press; n.d.) actually begins with a designer funeral, rather than a wedding. While the funeral she describes still maintains the aesthetic fantasies of the business elite—as seen in Indian couture—the shift from a wedding to a funeral suggests a degree of exhaustion with the bridal market.

¹³ See Chapter Four.

The Couture and Post-Couture Moment

Since the global financial crisis in 2008, haute couture, which has been in decline in the West since the 1960s, has become celebrated as the Indian exception, ostensibly reviving the authentic, royal art of handcrafted dressmaking (The Secret World, 2007). Unlike in the West, where an estimated 80% of the profits a fashion house makes come from the ready-to-wear and accessory market, for designers in India the same figure is made in couture, specifically bridal wear (“Inside,” 2013). Indian couturiers report that they make 90% of their sales during weddings or the Hindu festive season that lasts from September to March, making the global fashion calendar irrelevant, and working around the year quite unnecessary. To emphasize this, many journalists joked with me that “wedding season” is a legitimate season with a distinct climate in India.¹⁴



An ad for Tarun Tahilian's Bridal Couture (Luxpresso 2015).

¹⁴ The Hindu calendar dictates high-end fashion sales to the extent that during *Sharad* (the period in the Hindu calendar dedicated to praying for departed souls), most top designers do not make any direct sales, although they take bookings for future orders.

However, when I began fieldwork in 2012 or what some called the “post-couture moment,” the phenomenon of bridal wear was, according to many, in decline. Instead, a new rage for the “mass market” had begun to take its place by early 2015, and discussions about online retail and e-commerce websites were heated.¹⁵ Many designers jokingly recommended that I write a new book about Indian fashion portals. This shift was felt deeply when amazon.in—a global retail giant—outbid several companies to invest approximately 100 crore into the Indian market, and Indian Fashion in particular (“E-tailers Turn” 2015). In February 2015, the industry was pumping with renewed energy when amazon.in became the official new sponsors of India Fashion Week, a clear signal that Indian fashion was changing, and in the language of many, “democratizing.”¹⁶ Through these shifts that signaled the (re)turn of ready-to-wear, affordable, and mass-produced fashion, bridal wear was not only marked as a design compromise, but many couture clients—especially those who hailed from tier-two and tier-three cities¹⁷—were associated with “black money” or illegitimate wealth.

For a moment now, I would like to return to the opening narrative of this dissertation, which expresses one way in which bridal wear or couture was already being rejected, well before the e-commerce boom reached its all time, current peak. Forums like BE OPEN represent the hegemonic backlash to ready-to-wear fashion and couture in favor of Indian craft and textiles that were historically deemed separate from it. While fashion became a kind of bad word by the later months of my fieldwork, craft was adopted by those increasingly self-identifying as “the design crowd,” a label that was perceived to be hierarchically superior to the fashion community. The “design crowd”—which included light designers, artists making products, architects, and so on—

¹⁵ Other competing sites that became large marketplaces for Indian middle-class fashion are jabong.com, myntra.com, and flipkart.com.

¹⁶ As we will see in Chapter One, this is not the first time this word has been used to describe Indian fashion.

¹⁷ This is a classification system used by the Government of India. Tiers are calculated based on population and the city’s financial strength.

could conceivably save craft, and by 2015, they were the new "in" crowd at elite Delhi parties. This is further evidenced by the fact that, by 2015, India Design Forum (IDF) rather than India Fashion or Couture Week had become an important platform for Indian fashion designers to network, particularly if they were trying to expand into home décor. Along this trend, the global buzzword "artisanal" was used to describe ethical, crafts-based or the "best" fashion businesses (Deresiewicz 2015).

However, my research revealed that while the agenda propagated by BE OPEN and other design or crafts promoting forums were projected as "higher" than fashion, only a very small number of fashion producers felt nostalgia for a pre-liberalization or even pre-colonial artisanal era propagated via the language of design-saving craft. Moreover, sometimes those who publically expressed this nostalgia privately admitted that their positions were dishonest. For them, BE OPEN represented a closed door and an elite vision: in intimate conversations they still expressed the desire to make suits, little black dresses (LBDs) or even swimsuits that marked Indian fashion pre-1990s. Also, there were many designers whom I knew who were not invited to attend such forums. As Amina explained, the excluded were "probably not big enough designers to understand the sea-change," and were, therefore, still taking their training in ready-to-wear, Western garments seriously. Thus, the excluded, included, and those whom BE OPEN celebrated all mapped on to her understanding of class divides.

By 2013—the same year the BE OPEN event took place—there was a powerful counter-discourse against the highly profitable segment of bridal wear that accused the Indian couturier of being "over the top." I suggest this phrase indicates crossing a limit of acceptability, and in this case, tipping over the balance between art and commerce, craft and design, which all the designers I interviewed considered necessary. With the rise of anti-corruption politics across the country, couturiers were often suspected of being blatant moneymakers by other non-bridal designers; the

In this vein of actively shunning bling—or the aesthetic that results from being “over the top” in local fashion vernacular—many designers I spoke to even questioned what counted as fashion, a speculation that often caused them to recall the original mandate of making marketable, ready-to-wear clothing for the masses as *the* meaning of fashion in India. For example, while the economic capital it takes to become a couturier is considered very high, the skill, talent, and morality it is perceived to involve reflects the exact opposite; no designer I met felt that he or she was incapable of doing bridal wear but instead couched their decision not to as a choice.

In this dissertation, I show how resisting the production of clothes that denote profit also gives birth to a resurgence of designers asserting themselves as “really” middle class through linguistic expressions like “being from a good family.” This was a way in which they self-identified as moral and endowed with cultural capital, or as opposed to some of India’s new, economically prosperous designers whom they believed to lack these qualities. For example, Anavila Misra, a designer known for her very simple hand-woven linen saris, told me on the phone: “I make simple clothes because I want to provide a service, not to be a rich, corrupt celebrity” (Personal Correspondence, December 26th, 2014). Here, she was referencing her distance from the bridal wear market and the superficial ways in which it uses Indian craft.

Like Anavila, many designers who identified as belonging to a pre-reforms middle class described their business plans as deliberately “small” and their aesthetic as “toned down” in order to counter the couturier. This tempo-spatial language expressed their resistance to the quick fame they saw as easily acquirable through bridal wear or garments that represented the antithesis of taste. For many like Anavila, David Abraham, or Aneeth Arora,²⁰ whom I write about in Chapter Five,

²⁰ Not coincidentally, Aneeth is also a fellow graduate of NID and interned with David Abraham before launching her own label, *pero*. Along with most other NID graduates, they considered bridal wear to be antithetical to their well-reputed training in Indian textile.

resisting explicit profit translated to finding a more authentic past or turning to Indian textile to bring a conscious artisanal simplicity to their work. This movement received a lot of support from the elite through forums like BE OPEN, and by 2013-14 Indian textiles were increasingly declared to be the Unique Selling Point (USP) of fashion in India and modernizing them was the only practical way to go forward. This plan faced significant threat in April 2015, when the government of India passed a new act that blurred the line between powerloom and handloom.²¹

By the time I was writing my dissertation, many of these designers who resisted the excess of couture, bling, and “over the top” clothes that yielded profit debated whether a phenomenon called Indian minimalism, a movement championed by textile designers (and scholars) like Sanjay Garg of the label RAW MANGO, was possible. Indian Minimalism—historically thought of as a paradox—was discussed as an aesthetic movement that would involve the de-cluttering of embroidery, craft or “work” in order to “modernize” traditional textiles and skill. Through my fieldwork, Garg’s label RAW MANGO became a craze among clients he identified as “old money” or “cultured.” His soft, handmade paper catalogues –featuring text in both Hindi and English—were beautiful enough to be collectibles. Garg joked with me that his pure, hand-woven Banarsi saris were such hits that they were sold before they were conceptualized. On another occasion, he dreamily told me that if Indira Gandhi had been alive today, she would have been his number one patron (Personal Correspondence, May 1, 2015).

²¹ Currently, a powerful upper-class lobby is coming together to resist this act, which since 1985 ensured certain goods like saris to produced by handloom.



An image from RAW MANGO's *Shaher* (City) Collection (Raw Mango 2015).

While label's like Garg's RAW MANGO represented one form of success in the post-couture moment, for other designers like Namrata Joshipura, returning to the Western, ready-to-wear market in which they were trained at NIFT was the most responsible approach for Indian designers who also wanted to “stay true to oneself” and their original, professional expertise.²² These various forms of expressing backlash—whether in inventing Indian minimalism, producing mass market lines, or returning to prêt à porter—were what I read as the attempts of certain designers to distance themselves from the promises of economic growth through couture that began to signify immorality and corruption. Instead, they expressed a belonging to an imagined “simpler,” more educated, and authentic middle class that had taken a wrong turn through the projected liberalization boom. However, I argue that these claims themselves depend on pre-existing forms of privilege and cultural capital; for example, those who were able to think of creating cheaper lines for e-commerce websites that catered to the millions of Indians had usually already experienced great amounts of

²² Joshipura is often considered to be an exception because she has found some success in the Western ready-to-wear market. However, private discussions with her revealed that most of her profits came from markets overseas, and from New York in particular.

success, often through Indian bridal wear. Thus, by 2015, while turning to the “mass market” was couched as an attempt to re-democratize fashion, the scale of production it required naturally favored designers with huge work units, many employees, and a pre-existing financial safety net.

By looking at these varied perspectives that are all part of the story of Indian fashion, this dissertation arrives at an understanding of its history in which these tensions remain both present and unresolved. Rather than a linear story of development, I see the history of Indian fashion as a map shaped by class privilege, gender, and sexuality as they are engaged in deep entanglements.

Below, I sketch out the history that shapes my narrative in the following chapters:

Pre-1990s	Elite actors establish NIFT. The elite continue to support Indian textile and handloom, while middle-class Indians produce ready-to-wear Western garments for export, which becomes equated to ‘fashion.’
1990s	A rapid but momentary democratization of fashion. The “Indianization” of fashion begins and designers are mass-produced at NIFT. Meanwhile, elite industrialist families establish “Indian high fashion.”
2000 couture causes a split in the industry 2008	Couture enters and the bridal market begins. Fashion week begins in India. Indian fashion begins to “peak.” The global financial crisis gives rise to the perception that Indian designers are better off designing for India’s business elite, instead of for the Western consumer.
2012-14	Couturiers ²³ make expensive bridal garments, typically “heavy” lenghas, filled with embroidery. Elite and “old” ²⁴ middle-class designers express backlash against bridal wear/couture. Some designers return to Western, ready-to-

²³ Most of the industry’s most profitable designers are bridal wear couturiers. They include Sabyasachi, Rohit Bal, Manish Arora, Manish Malhotra, and Gaurav Gupta. Anamika Khanna and Anju Modi are the only women who regularly feature on this list.

²⁴ Designers who identified as belonging to an “old” or pre-liberalization middle class.

	<p>wear fashion²⁵ and start exploring mass market lines through e-commerce.</p> <p>Many embrace toning down and minimalism by returning to “simple” textiles + Indian craft.²⁶ These designers are embraced by, or come from the old-money elite.</p>
2015	<p>E-commerce enters Indian fashion in a major way. Online platforms like amazon.in, jabong.com and myntra.com become the new one-stop shops for buying ready-to-wear fashion. Amazon.in becomes the official sponsor for Delhi fashion week. For some ready-to-wear, middle class designers, this is a promising turn.</p>

Why is it important to study Indian fashion?

Despite significant work on fashion industries across the globe, the subject continues to be perceived as frivolous, insignificant, and covertly female. Dorinne Kondo (1997), perhaps the most well-known anthropologist to study fashion in the late twentieth century, has made significant contributions in reversing these assumptions by showing how Japanese fashion is inherently about maintaining existing race and gender inequalities. However, the subject of Indian fashion continues to lie far behind in gaining any such legitimacy. Despite being Asia’s second most populated country, the world’s fastest growing luxury market, and the only non-European country that hosts an annual couture week, the fashion industry in India is still curiously considered to be behind the times. This is quite shocking given that there are several prestigious public and private fashion colleges spread across India that produce several hundred fashion designers each year.²⁷ Moreover, the Fashion

²⁵ For example, designers like Namrata Joshipura and Rajesh Pratap Singh.

²⁶ For example, designers like David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore.

²⁷ Aside from NIFT, other prestigious fashion institutions include The Sophia College in Mumbai, The Pearl Academy of Fashion, and the National Institute of Design. There is also news of a Vogue Fashion School.

Design Council of India (FDCI)—which was established to manage the growing body of fashion designers in India in 1998—estimates that there are approximately 350 well-established Indian designers across the country,²⁸ mostly concentrated in New Delhi. However, despite these facts, if Indian fashion is considered to exist at all, many question whether it is worthy of serious academic inquiry. Until very recently, a thorough search for literature on Indian fashion would lead only to semi-autobiographic, popular journalism-style books written by industry or ex-industry producers.²⁹

This project seeks to undo this fundamental problem and makes a case not only for theorizing Indian fashion anthropologically, but also for revealing the politics behind its continued marginalization. It is a work in close dialogue with Emma Tarlo's ethnography *Clothing Matters* (1996), which is perhaps the most trusted academic investigation of this subject in South Asia. While Tarlo only briefly dabbles in the subject of fashion, she argues that clothing in India has suffered a history of marginalization precisely because of the politics of colonial conquest that shaped it. As she discusses, the binaries of nakedness versus clothing, dress versus adornment, and much later, garments versus fashion were maintained to distinguish the masculinized, powerful British from their feminine, Indian others. In this light, this dissertation follows Tarlo's lead in speaking back to a Eurocentric history by writing a historically situated ethnography of Indian fashion. I primarily join her in disrupting the hegemony of Western fashion, which continues to mark Indian fashion as backward, illegitimate, and mimetic, even in the imagination of its top producers.

Since the beginning of India's economic liberalization in the early 1990s, the growing economic power of the burgeoning middle class has meanwhile occupied a more secure place in the anthropological canon. How Indians were being fashioned by the entry of private enterprise that "reformed" the economy in industries ranging from health to telecommunications was to be closely

²⁸ This year, FDCI celebrates fifteen years or twenty-five seasons of India Fashion Week, a bi-annual trade show set up by the FDCI for Indian designers to showcase their work.

²⁹ Wendell Rodrick's autobiography *The Green Room* is a good example, as well as Meher Castelino's *Fashion Kaleidoscope*, which I discuss in Chapter One.

observed. The globalization of Indian goods and Indianization of global goods that were outcomes of these “outward” looking reforms were important subjects for anthropologists as well as sociological and cultural theorists. However, while fashion was addressed in this context—mostly as an example of foreign goods entering the local market—the question of Indian high fashion or couture was notably excluded, despite attracting significant attention in public media. In other words, as India liberalized, fashion was imagined as slowly penetrating the nation-state from the “outside.”

This project corrects some of these serious misconceptions that have deemed Indian fashion insignificant or altogether non-existent. I argue that a study of Indian fashion designers provides a unique lens into its burgeoning middle class and the changing cultural landscape of post-liberalization India. Firstly, this project shifts the focus away from consumption, and looks at the producers of fashion goods in order to examine the making of the “new” middle class. It underscores the complexity of this category, and the different reasons why actors choose to identify and invoke it. I specifically highlight how for many established designers, there is an imagined difference between a past, pre-liberalization or “old” middle class that is imagined as good, moral, and authentic and a “new” middle class which conjures ambiguous moral associations. Furthermore, I suggest that this difference is actively produced and reified through contemporary Indian fashion.

Following Bourdieu (1984) in understanding class as made through both economic and cultural indicators, I show that for many elite designers and those who identify as belonging to a pre-liberalization middle class, or an established old money family, financial gain in fashion perceivably comes at the cost of cultural capital, or non-economic forms of skills and knowledge that are closely linked to taste. As I discuss below, this is particularly relevant in the contemporary backlash to Indian couture and specifically the bridal wear market that promises great profitability but

simultaneously indicates a lack of morality and taste. For many designers, making money through commercial bridal wear has the quality of stripping down a past sense of self.

Moreover, I show how for “old” pre-liberalization middle class and elite producers, this “new” more prosperous middle-class identity that they are highly critical of is marked and translated to products; “new money” and “new” success is something they claim to see and feel. For example, phrases like “over the top” and “bling” are often linked to economically prosperous couturiers or India’s top designers, whom many consider to possess questionable values. By contrast, aesthetic acts of toning, paring down and embracing minimalism by showing less “work” or embroidery—or refusing to make “heavy” bridal wear—express a rejection of overt capitalistic gain and indicate a background marked by high cultural capital.

I argue that together these findings reveal deep nuances in India’s economic liberalization, which rather than creating a level playing field, has sharpened differences that are imagined as historical. I show how through producing contemporary Indian aesthetics, the categories of middle class, old, and new money that were deemed erased are being sharply policed. Moreover, I show how these hierarchies continue to inform gender inequalities; despite the “democratization” of fashion that first took place in the 1980s, being a successful female designer does not reap the same benefits as a male counterpart. Thus, an ethnography of Indian fashion designers that pays careful attention to the different ways in which designers describe their products—and each other—shows us that perhaps “reform” is not the best way to describe what the middle class really experienced in the last two decades (Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan 2011).

Moreover, even if Indian fashion and couture are legitimized as worthy subjects, simply because of the power of the middle class that strives to or does consume it, fashion still suffers the covert stigma of being female and therefore, frivolous. Building on Emma Tarlo's work (1996), which shows how the feminization of dress in India was a way in which British masculine, colonial

power was asserted, I show how a postcolonial, Indian male power continues to be enjoyed in an industry that is ostensibly about women. Beyond the fact that most of India's top designers are men, which is thought to be a simple affirmation of a universal truth, I show that while Indian couture is made in the name of the Indian bride, it is a platform upon which men across caste and class configure their relationships, friendships, loyalties, professional relationships, and family businesses (Mani 1998). I argue that this is particularly emphasized in the designer-*Masterji* (head craftsman) relationship that lies at the heart of producing Indian couture, and assumes that the designer is male. In other words, a serious investigation into Indian fashion shows how inequalities in class, caste, and gender continue to operate in tandem.

Class and Consumption in South Asia

In the last two decades, anthropological scholarship has been saturated with literature on the middle class in India and South Asia more generally (Deshpande 2003; Harris 2003; Fernandes 2000; Lukose 2009; Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003; Rajagopal 2001; Varma 1998). Most of this work has emphasized consumption as the defining principle or the “structuring structure” (Bourdieu 1990:53) of middle class behavior. While this literature has been helpful in understanding the imagined consumers of Indian fashion, I follow Elizabeth Traube (1992), who suggests that while consumers are active participants in meaning-making, studies of consumption overestimate their control. Instead, I concentrate on producers as a lens, rather than a class category, to further my understanding of the production of the Indian fashion industry. Thus, firstly, this dissertation responds to William Mazzarella's call to focus on forms of cultural production without “denying the importance of consumption as a social practice” (2003: 4). Recently, popular journalism has also framed the current era as defined by “producerism” –rather than consumerism—to highlight that it is the experience of making things that defines society (Deresiewicz 2015).

Second, this project affirms that a study on class in India cannot be completed without attention to caste. Caste was central to anthropological scholarship during the 1960s and 1970s (Beteille 2001; Dickey 2000; Douglas 1966; Dumont 1972; Spodek 1969), but became less important with the supposed triumph of class in the 1990s, particularly for those studying urban India. However, the shift to emphasizing class in academic work and the socio-political move to “open up” the market to lower-caste citizens is neither coincidental nor complete. Rather, as Barbara Harris-White concludes in her book *India Working* (2003), the new Indian business economy continues to make distinctions predicated upon caste, for example, by treating the rise of the low-caste Dalit entrepreneur as a puzzling paradox. Partha Chatterjee (2008) has similarly echoed how India’s liberalization has essentially meant high-caste Indians accumulate wealth by taking away resources from lower-caste peasants.

In this dissertation, the inextricable link between caste and class is revealed through the language of kinship that permeates Indian fashion, and many others sites of garment production across the globe (Carioli 2012; Moon 2011; Nguyen Tu 2010; Spodek 1969; Yanagisako 2002). By exploring the gendered language of kinship in Indian fashion, I engage with the constructions of “aunties and uncles” that challenge labor patterns in Asian-American fashion (Nguyen Tu 2010), the “bonds of family and love” in a New York factory (Moon 2011) and, in Sylvia Yanagisako’s work (2002), the patriarchy that is reproduced in Italian-based fashion firms.

I show how kinship, which maps on to the language of lineage, operates between certain kinds of designers who imagine themselves to follow the tradition of craft revival a la Ritu Kumar, considered the common “mother” of Indian fashion, versus other designers who come from the “outside.” Moreover, in the world of Indian couture, the role of caste in shaping fictive families is often reaffirmed over the purchase of high-end garments. For example, many designers told me that elite Sindhis made couturier Tarun Tahiliani, and well-off Baniyas made Gaurav Gupta. While I did

not keep an exact record of the caste groups to which consumers belonged, I would agree that these clichés that indicated the ongoing importance of caste reflected some truth.

However, I also use this body of work to specifically explore how powerful, male Hindu actors often impose the language of family in Indian fashion upon their male Masterjis or head craftsmen (Chapter Four). Here, I rely on Qayum and Ray's work (2003) on the culture of domestic servitude in India to show how acts performed in the name of family can ironically reinforce the traditional tropes of purity and pollution, and proximity and distance they attempt to erase. By specifically unpacking a relationship between a Baniya³⁰ upper-caste factory owner and his Muslim Masterji, I show how the language of brotherhood or what Geert De Neve calls "keeping it in the family" (2011) can reaffirm the power structures of class, caste, and gender it seeks to erase.

Anthropology of Clothing and Fashion

The anthropology of fashion is a small but growing body of literature that is resurrecting itself from its allegations as a non-serious, frivolous and non-academic field (Kondo 1997). This dissertation follows Dorinne Kondo's move to rescue fashion from its "suspect position," which is largely derived from its associations "with consumption and reproducing the forces of capitalism" (106). While these associations, as Kondo argues, is what makes fashion "at first glance an unlikely site to support any contesting claims" (106), I agree that it is precisely the refusal to engage with the subject seriously that perpetuates its underlying inequalities.

I therefore return to more historically prominent understandings of fashion, specifically when it was used to understand class or even deemed to be the reason for its existence (Appadurai 1986; Barthes 1990, Crane 2012; Liechty 2003; Simmel 1957). For example, Roland Barthes' foundational work *The Fashion System* (1990) uncovered the "internal language" of images to show how emerging trends like "poverty as style," were mirroring rather than countering bourgeois values.

³⁰ The Baniya is an occupational community of merchants, bankers, and moneylenders. Baniya businessmen are stereotyped as both naturally entrepreneurial yet stingy, untrustworthy, and communal.

Diana Crane's (2012) more recent study of fashion was grounded in Barthes' approach and attributed the "obsession with fashion among American women in the nineteenth century" to the "high levels of status competition and desire for success" despite their modest salaries (5). Through this work, there has also been a notable shift in thinking about the relationship between fashion and status to fashion and class. This has accompanied a theoretical shift from thinking about fashion in a Weberian sense—as a cultural aspect of lifestyle—to thinking about fashion as a vehicle that perpetuates economic difference, or in a Marxist sense.

In South Asian anthropology, clothing has been a concrete symbol of political and social change, used to discard old identities or adopt new ones (Appadurai 1986; Bean 1991; Cohn 1996; Tarlo 1996). To track these changes, anthropologists have taken Bourdieu's practice theory approach to understand clothing, particularly by mapping how social distinction and cultural capital is symbolized via re-fashioning the body. For example, Mark Liechty's (2003) work in Nepal examines the importance youths place on fashion to actively construct themselves as middle-class, Nepali, and worldly at the same time. The particular verb construction "doing fashion," signifies their "balanced," yet performative adornment practices.

However, while Liechty and his Nepali interlocutors use the term "fashion" quite freely, this word has been more loaded in the Indian context. For example, Emma Tarlo's work *Clothing Matters* (1996), which is incidentally, a favorite among some of my well-read informants, does not mention fashion until chapter nine. As she argues, clothing organized power hierarchies in British India, and then ostensibly reversed them through hand-woven *khadi* in the period of the Indian nationalist movement. Only when Tarlo moves her readers to a "modern village" in rapidly urbanizing New Delhi and introduces the "ethnic chic" phenomenon (a trend developed by Indian designers returning from the West) does fashion, cast as half-foreign, begin to appear. It is here, in 1989, that

Tarlo determines that “Delhi’s first fashion show takes place” (286). By contrast, Indian mainstream publications had declared this moment decades before.³¹

Following Tarlo’s lead, the 1990s were marked by important anthropological investigations into the subject of Indian clothing rather than Indian fashion. Much of this work looked at how the British used clothes to distance themselves from their “grotesque and gaudy-loving” subjects (Cohn 1996:309), or, in the reverse, how Indians sought to reaffirm this distance from them (Bean 1991; Trivedi 2007). It also considers claims that this tension was actually a result of the similarities between Indian Maharajas and the British upper class (Kuldova 2013). While I cannot validate this proposal, I use this literature to ground essentialisms like the “Indian love for pageantry and show” and the “Indian inclination to the drape” (Cohn 1996:310) that continue to inform fashion today. For example, I suggest that when drape and “work” are highlighted in Indian couture, the hierarchy between the drape and the stitched that has a long and complex history in India is questioned. As historian Vinay Bahl notes, after 1740 and during the final years of the Mughal political system, the English clothes that were imported into India distinguished themselves in being “cut, stitched, and shaped to the contours of the body” as opposed to the draped forms of Indian dress (2007:198).

Finally, in bringing fashion to the forefront, this dissertation converses with the recent cross-disciplinary literature on the subject (Bhachu 2003; Khaire 2011; Kulodva 2013; Nagrath 2003; Sandhu 2014; Sengupta 2005; Skov 2002). By uncovering the relationship between value and fashion in post-liberalization India, I engage with Tereza Kuldova and her rich discussion on the Mughal “neo feudal” or “royal chic” aesthetic that dominates Indian couture. Kuldova borrows Gilman-Opalsky’s term “spectacular capitalism” (2011:17) to suggest that the “royal chic” look or neo feudal aesthetic that couturiers rely on is a good example of the way in which Indian capitalism “disguises

³¹ Indian lifestyle magazines like *Eve’s Weekly* were showcasing images from fashion shows in the 1970s, and many journalists claimed such shows were taking place decades earlier. For example, an issue in December 1991 featured an article by journalist and ex-model Meher Castelino, who stated: “1930 was the year when the first fashion show was held in India...the garments were European as well and so were the models.”

its internal logic” (2013:55) and perpetuates class inequality. In her argument, couture’s one main function is to maintain “feudal caste hierarchies and caste and class differences (In Press; n.d). While I agree with Kuldova’s general point that maintaining differences govern Indian high fashion, I show how Indian couture actually disempowers the figure of the designer who, she suggests, is responsible for perpetuating exploitation. Instead, I argue that it is only through the couturier’s recasting of himself as a family businessman who is removed from fashion production that his power above craftsmen can be asserted. In other words, it is when he shifts from identifying as a designer to being a large-scale family businessman (which then primarily marks him a brother and son) that he regains his lost power and credibility.

Methods and Structure

Given the social and historical complexities that underlie the making of Indian fashion, identifying the boundaries of the field in this project was challenging (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). While many of my interlocutors advised me to look where the craftsmen were—as if their space was permanent and fixed—others advised me to attend fashion parties if I wanted to get to know designers well. I was also warned that a study on Indian fashion without a chapter about NIFT was useless. Those who tried to push me into telling a story of textiles instead directed me to the National Institute of Design (NID).

My way of tackling these suggestions was to incorporate them as far as they made sense, making this project intensively multi-sited. Through five chapters I take my readers to a NIFT in New Delhi, a factory in Noida, a designer’s studio in the urban district of Hauz Khas Village, a luxurious shopping mall in Vasant Kunj, and behind the scenes of, as well as to the stage of Delhi’s fashion weeks. I also shadow India’s youngest couturier, Shivan Sharma³² on a business trip to Hong Kong where he traveled for a trunk show. By tracking ideas, goods, and fashion producers across

³² Name changed.

these borders and back again, I “move” with fashion, a methodology adopted by Saloni Mathur (2007), as she studied the transnational flows in which Indian art is and historically has been implicated. Traversing these fields and studying the space between them was important in showing how fashion happens everywhere in Delhi; but what becomes legible as fashion shapes and is shaped by the multiple power hierarchies at play.

Access and Class Position

How well I understood the hierarchies of the industry was largely predicated on the “problems of access,” issues not uncommon to anthropologists studying cultural industries (Caldwell 2008; Ortner 2013; Powdermaker 1950). While there seemed to be no lack of people calling themselves designers, to get to know those who were celebrated, written about, and showing at fashion weeks required a huge effort. Only when I “broke in” to the industry, I realized that most designer schedules are unforgiving. Apart from twelve-hour workdays six days a week, designers are also required to maintain hectic social lives to help them promote their brands. “Having to” attend parties, socialize, drink and enjoy weddings—phrases I found amusing as obligations—I soon realized, was very much part of their jobs. Thus, when I initially reached out to designers myself, apart from giving me a quick slot for a quick interview, most never got back to me when I described my intentions to study them more intimately. Fortunately, with the help of old family friends—particularly a team of well-respected choreographers who have been working in Indian fashion since the 1980s—a few eventually agreed to let me in the door.

However, *despite* these introductions that I was very fortunate to benefit from, the politics and difficulties of studying up (Nader 1969) and gaining access to many members of India’s elite were clear. While extra effort was made to connect me with India’s top couturiers, it was impossible to meet some of them. A few never followed up with my request for an interview and some ignored it, but chatted with me at length when we were introduced at social gatherings. When I expressed

difficulty in accessing the people marked as industry pioneers, some of their upper-class clients whom I knew well recommended I accompany them on shopping trips where they had individual appointments. I agreed to do this in the beginning, but soon found that I was also being confused as a prospective client.

After a few months, a handful of top designers allowed me to come to their houses or massive factories, usually after being pushed by someone who knew them before they became famous. I noticed that in introductions, when our mutual connection would refer to “huge” designers by their nicknames rather than their eponymous brand names, they usually followed up. This simple strategy seemed to have considerable effect on getting them to think about themselves as people rather than as brands. This re-naming took many of them back to their old days and caused them to talk a great deal about the “closeness” of the industry “then.”

However, while I was grateful for these opportunities, I would also be dishonest if I didn't point out that the industry's most successful designers had a very affected air about them; many top designers spoke to me as if I was a young student doing a cute fashion project, and often used the third person to talk about themselves. Some recommended that I look at the pages of fashion magazines for answers to the questions I would usually ask to break the ice. I read this as interview jadedness; a sentiment that I also found affected many sought-after Masterjis who were tired of (particularly foreign) journalists. Other designers were even more guarded and tried to put me on to their press secretaries instead of answering questions themselves. Though many of these were emotionally difficult experiences, I was both amused and taken aback by the grandiose claims that some designers made, such as the assertion that their label had brought the “drape” to India or that they were single-handedly responsible for reviving a particular dying craft.

However, as I got deeper into studying the most successful producers in the Indian fashion industry, I began to realize the various divides among these actors. This began when I decided to

follow one successful couturier closely. When he finally responded to my request to come to his factory, I showed up the next day and continuously afterwards. After about a week, he remarked that he had never seen a “journalist like me,” and in time, he began to refer to me as a “fly on the wall,” adopting anthropological vocabulary to make sense of my methodology. By the end of my fieldwork, he introduced me to others as an anthropologist and explained our ongoing relationship as “invisible companionship.” I suggest this idea of invisibility, which for him signaled an authentic relationship or closeness, was a carefully chosen word. It countered the value placed on what could be superficially seen and shown through garments, which for him and others characterized value in the industry.

This initial access to one “big” couturier snowballed into doing the ethnography of many other top designers, and I became aware of how many of them wanted deeper investigations into their work; an unfulfilled desire despite the significant media attention they received. Many whom I got to know well thanked me for treating Indian fashion seriously.

Still, almost all of the top designer’s and producers I spoke to were difficult to know intimately. While many of the “old school” top designers were interested in my project but were simply too busy, other young designers seemed to have impenetrable, very dramatized public selves marked by juvenile and sometimes quite ridiculous behaviors. Though I initially welcomed the sympathy people offered me when they warned that I was studying the city’s biggest “divas,” staying committed to ethnography soon diluted this idea of celebrity. When I began to ground the intimidating, extravagant public behaviors of the younger top designers, who eventually opened up to me, against the daily, mundane work that followed them, I began to look for the meaning and logic behind these performances that were glossed by others and themselves as “mad”(Chapter Four). It was only when I saw how little control many designers had over their own brands in the

workplace, or how far fashion took them from what the designer label actually promised, that I understood these acts as both defensive mechanisms and coping strategies (Chapter Four).

Nevertheless, despite my making sense of these experiences, the barriers of exclusion often affected me deeply. In order to get past the “failures” of not being able to meet certain key people whom many promised me would be receptive, I relied a great deal on what Sherry Ortner has called “interface ethnography” (2010:213) and participated in events where the industry presented itself to the public. These ranged from fashion shows (which also required some maneuvering to get into) to public lectures and open invitation parties; in time, regular attendance positioned me as a participant observer.

Moreover, through these constant attempts to break in to the worlds of “big” actors, younger and less famous designers were more than gracious and forthcoming. Most of them opened the doors of their humble studios to me when I went knocking with a casual reference, and invited me into their complex worlds of struggles and ambitions. As a handful of them put it, they “had nothing to lose by hanging out,” a calculation that signified their hunger for any kind of attention or commercial success. However, by the time I was writing my dissertation, many of these self-described “babies of the industry” were commercially successful and comfortable with multiple fashion journalists and bloggers calling them for quick bytes of information. While for some of them, this quite rapid success was a way for them to show me how low the standards of the industry were, others quickly learned the performances that mark “big” designers, often laughing loudly at “old” memories that had taken place just a year ago when they were “small.” Nevertheless, it was in the studios of small designers and in conversations with the less successful that I felt comfortable asking the questions I needed to, especially about fabrics and pattern-making techniques, of which I knew very little.

Moreover, because of complicated ways in which the producers of fashion interpreted their product, the question of “what to wear in the field as an anthropologist,” (Tarlo 1996) was an important consideration. As someone studying the industry, I was aware that my clothing choices were often read for class position and as an indication of how “inside” I was getting, and which story of Indian fashion I was getting on the inside of. I had to ask myself: What did wearing hand-woven textile mean? What did wearing branded clothing indicate? How could I show my interest in the industry without being confused as a client?

The implications of my own sartorial decisions particularly struck me at the 2013 book launch of a fashion journalist who made a deliberate attempt to justify herself as both objective and an “outsider,” a claim she made by pointing to the “simple” hand-woven sari she had on. Later, one designer told me that not only was the journalist an “outsider” but also an “auntie”—a derogatory label used to describe a woman who is enthusiastic but struggling to actually meet a subjective standard of ‘cool.’ Again, I found the use of kinship here interesting, as an “auntie” signified someone who was outside, or removed from the direct lineage of fashion. While I appreciated the distance that journalist was trying to impress upon me, from this backtalk I understood that my outsider status would not be marked by something as simple as my choice of garment but rather by my everyday actions and decisions.

Eventually, I found that what was most important in gaining access to designers was establishing myself as a non-client in multiple ways. I observed that designers—even the most profitable—mostly dressed down to show their positions as producers and to distance themselves from their clients. I followed their cue, which seemed to be a very important move in signaling my position. Soon, even if I appreciated the work of designers, the fact that “I was not stupid enough to pay money for it,” as one designer put it, positioned me as someone who came from a “good family,” a code that indicated a high cultural capital background.

Although I eventually got pretty good at establishing closeness with designers, this proximity had to be reversed once I shifted my field site to the factory. While my introduction to the designer's craftsmen and employees through the designer himself made sure that I would get unlimited access, I realized that I only began getting inside this world when employees asked me not to disclose our conversation, or in some cases, meet after work hours. The desire to maintain privacy cut across senior employees who were considered the designer's "right-hand women," head Masterjis who were considered "like brothers" to the family, and finishing ladies who occupied the lowest rungs professionally.

Moreover, by always making room for private meetings, I learned that it was not so much that people had bad things to say about the owners, but rather, people across hierarchies wanted to express that they were a lot more than employees of a fashion firm. Many of our meetings, which usually took place in small cafés or their homes, were used to talk about things outside of fashion, namely lovers, husbands, politics, and food. However, while we shared these meaningful experiences, when I met the employees back in the factory workspace, they were quick to greet me in their professional personas, almost erasing the intimacy we had previously shared. I eventually understood these dual selves as a way in which they made clear to me that they were neither defined by their professions nor by the bonds of family imposed by the factory owners.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation is divided into two parts. Part One consists of two chapters and part two, of three. Part One focuses on how the dominant discourse of Indian fashion was introduced, legitimized and reproduced as hegemonic. The second part offers resistances, subversions and alternatives to this rhetoric from the perspectives of different industry actors. The flow of this dissertation also mirrors the technical process of producing a fashion collection; the chapter titles reflect stages in this journey.

I begin Chapter One, “The Moodboard: NIFT and the Making of the Indian Designer” by taking my readers to the 1970s before Indian fashion was formally introduced. The chapter moves through the next three-and-a-half decades before arriving at the present, illustrating two main points: 1) the Indian designer identity was forged as not *darzi* (tailor) and not craftsman, but rather, as a “new” middle class professional, and 2) while Indian fashion was ostensibly “for” the middle class, the Indian elite remained the gatekeepers of this cultural industry, as well as the craft sector that they kept distinct from it. I call this chapter “The Mood Board” to invoke the point at which fashion production for all designers begins; it is often on a physical board where inspirational images and materials that are meant to inform a collection are pinned. I similarly see NIFT as setting the stage for the story of the industry. I wish to bring out the great expectations that were set out for it, in order to make sense of the unanticipated consequences that followed.

I then move to my second chapter that I call “Getting To Work,” where I introduce the industry in which those who were trained to be designers are expected to work. I show that what ultimately gets valued in the fashion marketplace is not the creativity of designers nor how well they are able to use and apply their education, but rather, how well they are able to “show” the evidence of the craftsman’s labor in their own work. By moving from the chapter and physical mood board to the site of work (which is what happens in the factory space when garments begin to get made), I show how the inspirations and ideals that the designer begins with get lost when he, and his fashion business, are put to *work*.

In Part Two—Resistances, Subversions and Alternatives—I offer another paradigm to understand the hegemonic discourse on Indian fashion. By investigating the space of the high fashion factory and exposing the relationships that sustain it, Chapter Three, “The Counter Sample: Making Brothers Out of Masters,” acts as a physical counter sample, or the garment a designer produces to perfect the errors in the first, original piece. In this chapter, I show that, while designers

assert the language of kinship in order to produce what is called “heavy work”—or the mark of Indian couture—upon their Masterjis, this language is met with resistance. Rather than neatly accepting the titles of brotherhood thrust upon them, Masterjis vie to be recognized as professional workers and resist the language of ethics increasingly adopted by India’s new corporate workplaces (De Neve 2014). By throwing light on their voices, I play with the word “counter” in the chapter title “Counter Sample” to show how the perfected garments that craftsmen produce also embody alternate meanings.

In Chapter Four, “The Finishing,” I follow India’s youngest couturier across national and international borders to show how he develops a strategy to subvert the binaries of old and new money and art and commerce that organize the industry. I argue that his behavior that is casually identified as “madness” and shared by other industry actors is not arbitrary. Closely linked to success, I suggest madness disrupts the two main binaries at work in the industry. I also show how madness is a subject position that makes sense of contradictions in post-liberalized India.

Moreover, in keeping with the flow of fashion production, the choice of “The Finishing” as the title of this chapter follows the production task at hand after the counter sample is completed. Finishing is the point at which the garment is near complete, but often also when its lack is identified. A problem with finish can be an emotional feeling or technical judgment that something is missing. Moreover, issues with finishing can persist long after a designer declares something to be marketable, and finishing often becomes the standalone reason why clients reject garments, dismiss couture shows, and lose interest in brands.

I see madness as an ongoing performance constructed by the designer who makes sense of himself as a finished product. In other words, madness expresses that even though something may be sold, or a designer may be marked as successful, there is a looming issue at hand. As I show, many designers talk about finishing as a missing “feeling” that cannot really be explained, and this

maps on to their sentiments about the industry and ambivalence surrounding India's economic reforms that produced it. Thus, I reveal how these problems at the "end" sometimes refer to issues that marked the beginning of Indian fashion.

Following the finishing of garments, they are typically packaged and sent for media shoots or photographs that are published in fashion magazines. My final chapter, "The Shoot," introduces the perspective of fashion journalists and editors who write about the industry, as well as a designer, Aneeth Arora, who is famous for turning down fashion media or what she and others refer to as "press." Here, I explore the responsibility of the fashion media, whose job is often reduced to shooting out rapid bytes about Indian fashion in order to portray the industry as fast-paced, and Indian designers as excelling. By analyzing the temporal and spatial language of these subjects, I reflect on the meanings behind the speeds, crashes, and burns that mark them. These narratives point to the extent to which working for a global fashion magazine is a highly localized, and often contradictory experience (Tsing 2000).

Through this two-part dissertation and its five chapters, I take my readers through more than three decades of Indian fashion or what most designers consider the entire history of the industry. This time period, beginning in the 1980s and ending in 2014-5, corresponds to the moments of pre-liberalization, liberalization, and the current, ongoing period referred to as post-liberalization. I show how doing ethnography of the Indian fashion industry, whose intent was to reflect this linear development, actually provides a lens into the more occluded narratives that challenge it. I suggest that these narratives are, in some sense, responses to what the political activist and writer Arundati Roy has called "The Gush Up Effect" produced by liberalization: the nation's one hundred richest people own assets equivalent to one fourth of the India's total GDP (2014:7).

By highlighting these voices against the dominant, public celebrations of an ostensibly successful fashion industry, I argue that this ethnography provides a simultaneous critique of India's

liberalization and yet suggests that consequences like “market failure” (Chandrashekhar and Ghosh 2002) are not end points. Instead, I suggest the way in which designers and the people who work for them have experienced liberalization is in itself varied and diverse, giving birth to new subjectivities. Through these findings, I wish for my readers to understand Indian fashion as a highly nuanced product of India’s liberalization reforms. I hope that the glamour of fashion that often blinds people from closely looking at the industry is disrupted by some of the very real experiences of failure, disappointment, and anger that are equally part of it.

Finally, in the conclusion of this dissertation, entitled, “The Show,” I take my readers to a recent panel discussion that I was invited to as I was wrapping up this project. I use the moment to look back on the two-and-a-half years I spent immersed in the life worlds of Indian fashion and designers, and point out the shifts that I saw taking place at the end of my research. I end this dissertation with some reflections on the study of Indian fashion and its future directions. As the designer bows out—the action that marks the end of any fashion show—I ask some questions that read this bow as a sign of exit rather than credit. However, I also offer the possibility that we may see a return through the current e-commerce boom.

PART ONE

Great Expectations: Beginnings, Establishments, and Values

“Every time there is a push for Indian fashion, there is a backlash. Every time I fly a foot, I get cut down almost the whole length of the flight...but an inch remains, and that’s where the magic happens.” – Mithali Sen, Fashion and Textile Designer.*

Chapter One

The Mood Board: Producing Indian Designers at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi

Introduction

It was a fairly typical day in Professor Veena’s Core Pattern-Making class. Students leisurely opened their backpacks and chitchatted, taking up the first ten minutes of class time. Everything seemed routine until Veena³³ cut her class abruptly short and asked students to gather around her table for a “special discussion.” She had spread open a copy of the Times Of India, with a huge section of the newspaper outlined in neon highlighter. The attention-commanding title read: “No More Bling Please: Says Sonia Gandhi.” The article featured the full speech delivered by Congress leader Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, following her visit to NIFT’s newest campus in Rae Bareli.³⁴

The story reported that Mrs. Gandhi had pleaded with India’s current and future designers to stop making “bling,” which she equated with “adding more ornamentation to a garment.” Citing her mother-in-law Indira Gandhi as the ultimate “style icon,” Sonia Gandhi—who the article reminds us is of “Italian origin”—explained she “preferred the simpler saris that showcased India’s textiles.” She encouraged fashion students to “work more closely with the craftsmen” as they developed their careers.

Following the politician’s brief but powerful statement were responses from several successful designers—the list included many of my informants like Namrata Joshipura, Tarun Tabiliani, and Gaurav Gupta.³⁵ Interestingly, rather than the designers directly concurring or disagreeing with Mrs. Gandhi’s opinions, they had multiple interpretations of it. Namrata suggested: “I think she means that craft is taking a beating...” Another designer, Riyaz Gangji, said: “Indian designers have a right to express themselves through craftsmanship.” It is perhaps not a

³⁴ Rae Bareli is a city in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

³⁵ Both Gaurav Gupta and Namrata Joshipura are also NIFT graduates.

coincidence that while he was the most courageous in expressing his views, he was also the least famous designer interviewed. I found it remarkable that no one felt the need to define the colloquial word “bling” or contest the assumptions the article made about it.

For Veena—herself a loyal Congress supporter—this article served as the focal point of the class. She used the article to assure students that the training that they were receiving—a decidedly anti-bling, “professional” fashion course—was closer to the mission Mrs. Gandhi supported than what currently dominated the market. “Now you all understand? Even your leaders are telling you to listen to your Ma’am instead of doing bridal stuff.” In aligning herself with the politician, she effectively distanced herself from “bling” and bridal “stuff.”

A lively dialogue followed. A young woman named Tarveen asked: “But Ma’am, how come all the Indian designers who are making bling are selling well?” Another student immediately picked up on Tarveen’s tone, without giving Veena time to respond: “And, Ma’am what will happen if BJP comes into power?” referring to the possible victory of the opposition party, and simultaneously taking a soft but humorous jab at her Congress loyalty. To both of these statements, Veena responded that anything outside of Indian craft did not measure up. For her, “bling,” represented the downfall of Indian fashion, despite its seemingly unstoppable rise.³⁶ On the other hand, the realm of craft and textile was imagined as distinct, superior, and timeless. Ready-to-wear fashion occupied an ambivalent place in between.

[Field notes: November 9, 2012]

This introductory excerpt is set at NIFT in New Delhi, the birthplace of ready-to-wear fashion in India. It reveals the insights of one of the institution’s most important faculty members—Professor Veena Narain*—who has been teaching at NIFT since the early 1990s, when previous restrictions on export and foreign goods were dismantled as part of India’s economic liberalization (Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003; Rajagopal 2001). Veena’s “special discussion” signals a nostalgia

³⁶ In January 2015, over-the-top clothing became associated with the BJP, thanks to the jacket Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s wore in his meeting with President Obama. During a lecture given by craft expert Ms. Leila Tyabji, she mournfully asked her audience: “What had happened to Indian culture?” as she displayed an image of Modi wearing this bold, monogrammed garment on her Powerpoint slide (February 17, 2015).

for a pre-NIFT past: she expresses a longing for Indira Gandhi's craft-centric approach to fashion and supports Sonia Gandhi's promotion of Indian craftsmen. Through these statements, Veena distinguishes herself from the lucrative "bridal stuff" of contemporary high fashion or couture. However, her expressed ideal of a craft-based fashion industry is also strikingly different from her primary teaching responsibility: training students in pattern making for ready-to-wear Western garments.

A few ironies are immediately evident: in desiring the return of the (male) Indian craftsman and a craft-centric industry in the name of a more authentic past, Veena disempowers her middle-class, mostly female students;³⁷ her own privileged position at NIFT is the result of the very economic reforms which she criticizes; and her advice to students is at odds with the lucrative possibilities that both Indian couture and the rise of e-commerce offer them. Together, these ironies point to Veena's vision of Indian fashion that perpetuates a specific, historically elitist perspective.

In this chapter, I show how, despite efforts to democratize Indian fashion through public, educational institutes like NIFT,³⁸ it remains a ground for producing inequality. Today, NIFT is heralded as a high-tech campus³⁹ that consistently tops university rankings and enjoys a steady rise in both admission and placement rates.⁴⁰ Yet, while NIFT is a passport to upward mobility for lower-class and caste students, upper-middle class and high caste students downplay their NIFT degrees. As a result, despite steps to democratize or "open up" Indian fashion, there is a simultaneous assertion of fashion as belonging to an authentic, elitist past, which excludes ready-to-wear fashion. With these paradoxes in play, I show how NIFT becomes a platform to query the effects of liberalization at large; it asks: "who wins, who loses, and who even knows?" (Ganguly Scrase 2001).

³⁷ In this classroom, there were twenty-two women and eight men.

³⁸ For example, in 2009, NIFT increased seats to accommodate students who applied through the OBC (other backward castes) quota ("Nift to Increase," 2009).

³⁹ The Delhi campus was built at the high cost of nine-crore rupees.

⁴⁰ Admissions at NIFT saw a 28 percent rise in 2013 from 2012, with 3,187 students enrolling for various undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Nearly 80 percent of NIFT graduates are successfully placed in fashion jobs after graduation with an average annual salary package of four lakhs.

Thus, even though contemporary classrooms are filled with students from diverse class and caste backgrounds, channeling an elite ideology continues to be one of the ways in which upper-middle class faculty members like Veena and her privileged students mark their power.

This chapter tells the story of Indian fashion over three-and-a-half decades by focusing on NIFT. It problematizes the story of Indian fashion as linear and NIFT's development as increasingly democratic. It begins in the 1970s, or the era leading up to NIFT's establishment—a moment marked by both anxiety and celebration. As I show, the mission to “open up” fashion was publically cast as good for the middle class, but this portrayal is incomplete. I conclude in 2014-5, when hope for ready-to-wear, Western designers who were displaced through the development of Indian fashion is re-emerging. I locate this hope in the rise of e-commerce that renews the promise of Indian fashion as essentially for middle class consumers, and based on ready-to-wear.

To unpack this argument, I draw upon Althusser's concept of ideology to understand fashion education and training in creative institutes globally (Arvidsson 2007; Bill 2012; McRobbie 2002). While scholars like Amanda Bill employ Althusser to argue that “fashion education functions as an ideological fiction” through which designer subjects “misrecognize” their reality (Althusser 2001 [1991]), the case of NIFT points to something different. Rather than students being victims of a “vampire like fashion-apparatus,” as Gilian Ursell describes in the case of workers in the television industry (2000:816), I show how different actors experience NIFT variably. I show how certain students make sense of their education at NIFT and the state of Indian fashion through its limits, rather than by “misrecognizing” its reality. I suggest this is one of the ways in which privilege is marked.

To make this argument, I situate narratives from NIFT's past and present faculty and students—who range from the ages of 18 to 70—to show how these diverse actors embody distinct ideologies and represent different generations of fashion producers. However, much variation also

exists within these groups. While I use the concept of decades to structure this chapter, I am also aware of the debates around this concept as discussed in Sherry Ortner's work on Generation X, which demographers define as the cohort of people born between 1965-1976 (Ortner 1998:416). Following Ortner, this chapter considers public culture critiques of the generational framework, confirming a "single generational consciousness as highly implausible in an era as conscious about social difference as this one" (1998:417). Therefore, like Ortner, I understand generations as actors consolidated around battles, aspirations, and ideas that are dominant at a given time, such as economic instability and unpredictability.

Rather than concluding something definitive about each decade, I locate what Raymond Williams has called the "structures of feeling" (1976) that comes to shape these different historical moments. To locate the "structures of feeling" means uncovering both articulated and lived histories, and pursuing dominant and suppressed narratives. Gallagher and Greenblat understand this term to mean the "cul de sacs where unrealized possibilities were stranded" (2000:60). I follow them in the attempt to highlight the "stranded possibilities" embedded within public narratives of the industry, and of NIFT's emergence. In particular, I show how the "feeling" the architects of Indian fashion had for craft never quite matched the practical approach with which they promoted ready-to-wear fashion.

"Kamal"⁴¹ and the Gang:" Mrs. Gandhi and Non-Fashion in the 1970s

In early 2012, I had dinner with a group of friends, now mostly in their mid-to-late 50s, who consider themselves the "dinosaurs" of Indian fashion.⁴² This was where I first heard about a gentleman named Kamal. I later learned that Kamal was a nickname this member, who came from a royal family that has enjoyed considerable economic and cultural power since British rule.

⁴¹ Name changed

⁴² In Chapter Four and throughout this dissertation, I have also referred to this group as "old school" fashion producers. This is another label they adopt in an effort to be distinguished from some "newer" designers they see as lacking cultural capital. I also suggest that the invocation of the word "school" in their own labels is ironic, considering few of these producers were formally trained in fashion.

Subsequently referred to as a “great storyteller”—a description that hinted at a lack of accuracy—by those who were closely affiliated or belonged to this group, I was advised to include him in my research. Despite trying to arrange a meeting through the “dinosaurs,” I only managed to meet Kamal a year after that dinner. This delay, however, had little to do with his kindness: early in our exchange he invited me to visit his lavish five-bedroom home in Mussoorie, a popular hill station in North India. Although I sensed that he was a man of importance, I was unaware of the extent of his influence in shaping the contemporary Indian fashion industry⁴³ until I finally met him in February 2014.

A craft scholar and textile designer friend named Varun*⁴⁴ accompanied me to visit Kamal. The two share a close friendship and have worked together on several, mostly crafts-based, projects funded by the prestigious National Institute of Design (NID), which was set up in 1961.⁴⁵ In contrast to NIFT, Kamal and the “dinosaurs” hold NID in extremely high regard. The close relationships forged through NID were apparent when I learned that Kamal was staying in Delhi with his ex-partner, also a NID graduate, and a partner of the very successful brand. Aside from the fact that all three self-identify as craft “revivalists,” and as textile rather than fashion designers, they were also all gay, upper class and caste men, which I suggest contributes to their authority in the industry.⁴⁶

On entering the spacious bungalow on the day of our meeting, I commented on Kamal’s white Ambassador car that was parked out front.⁴⁷ In response, Varun listed the number of NID

⁴³ I will go on to explain why, though he was affiliated with this term, he never used it himself.

⁴⁴ Name changed.

⁴⁵ NID was a product of the Indian government’s Industrial Policy Resolution that was established in 1953. The resolution invited Charles and Ray Eames to create a document titled “The India Report.” In the report, NID was discussed as an autonomous national institution for research, service, and training in industrial design and visual communication.

⁴⁶ While I find the relationship between sexuality and power in the Indian fashion industry (and globally) very interesting, it is outside the scope of this project.

⁴⁷ The ambassador car in India has historically symbolized Indian nationalism, bureaucracy, and power. Recently however, contemporary Indian artists—most famously, Subodh Gupta—ironically re-appropriated the vehicle to ask

craft patrons who still owned Ambassador cars.⁴⁸ Later, relating this amazing number to Sita Wadhwa,* a NIFT faculty member, she suggested that rather than “patrons of Indian culture,” it was more apt to call “Kamal and his gang” *patronizing* (Personal Correspondence, August 1, 2013). Her clever wordplay questioned the assumed purity and superiority that was once linked to the Ambassador car and the elite Indian bureaucracy. I found her use of the term “gang” versus the group’s own self-identification as “dinosaurs” particularly astute, and noted that this descriptor was frequently used by outsiders who were not part of this elite group. While the term “dinosaurs” was light-heartedly adopted by these members to reference extinction, in this chapter, I show how they continue to enjoy immense power in the industry and thus prefer Sita’s etic description of them as a “gang.”

At the house, we were served fresh lemonade and guided to a plush room laden with fabrics, books, Burmese fans, and antique carpets. A domestic staff member informed us that Kamal was doing his prayer rituals, to which Varun nodded without surprise. Finally, Kamal emerged clad in a white *khaadi* shawl wrapped a few times over his tall frame with turmeric smeared across his forehead. One could not help but think that he looked like a male version of the late Mrs. Indira Gandhi and was intentionally invoking her appearance.

Varun and I spent many hours seated on his sofa, as Kamal the “great storyteller” began his narratives almost as mechanically as someone hitting “play” on a record player. He would stop every so often and in an animated and loud voice demand: “Now, ask me something!” as if being featured on a late night game show. Sometimes my questions would be clarifications of translations—he used more French than I could understand—or verified nicknames: “Indie” was the late Prime Minister

questions about the state of the nation and the meaning behind an Indian national identity. The ambassador car was also discussed in Rana Dasgupta’s work, *Capital* (2014), a nonfiction bestseller that draws a broad portrait of Delhi in the 21st century. Tracking the changes in the use of the car to understand the devastating effects of liberalization, Dasgupta stated: by the early 2000s, India’s richest were the ones who travelled around in white ambassadors (346). His statement is indicative of the blur between India’s private and public sectors, government and corporate capitalism, and a commentary on corruption that for him and many others indicate one of the most serious failures of liberalization.

⁴⁸ This also includes Aneeth Arora, another NID graduate, whom I discuss in Chapter Five.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi, with whom Kamal clearly shared an intimate friendship, “Iss” was the legendary Japanese designer Issey Miyake, and “D” was Diana Vreeland,⁴⁹ the former editor of Harpers Bazaar and Vogue. “Pupul” was Mrs. Jayakar, one of India’s most prominent Cultural Ministers who was instrumental in setting up the Festivals of India.⁵⁰ As the historian Ramachandra Guha notes—and as was confirmed in Kamal’s narrative—Mrs. Jayakar was Mrs. Gandhi’s closest friend (2008:493), and this friendship was central to “the gang’s” power. Finally, “Rathi” was Mrs. Rathi Vinay Jha, who was not part of this inner group, but a close associate who worked in the Ministry of Textiles and later went on to become head of the Fashion Design Council of India. Together, they made up a “gang” and in Kamal’s words, “established and promoted what became known as Indian design and culture” (Interview, February 1, 2014).

While subsequent interviews revealed diverse perspectives within the “gang,” they saw as their collective responsibility the revival of culture through Indian crafts. In Kamal’s words, throughout the 1970s preserving India’s handloom and exhibiting India’s textile heritage meant “flying around the world and doing shows with the sole responsibility of showing what India was all about” (Interview, February 1, 2014). As Mathur notes, at this time, representing “Indian culture” primarily rested on putting up spectacles or “oriental dream worlds for the metropolitan consumer and imagined experiences of the colony” (2007:34). Anyone listening to Kamal’s stories could sense the immense power that he and other privileged Indian men and women from high class and caste backgrounds enjoyed globally as patrons of craft.

According to Kamal, “showing” Indian culture through handcrafted textiles and garments was a huge and unparalleled success in the industry. For example, to provide evidence of the “glory days,” he quoted letters from Diana Vreeland that he carefully preserved in a folder. In each,

⁴⁹ One of Diana Vreeland’s most cited quotes is “Pink is the Navy Blue of India.” This quote illustrates the oriental lens through which Western fashion critics like herself viewed Indian visual culture.

⁵⁰ Saloni Mathur (2007) has described the Festivals of India as a series of large-scale exhibits through the 1980s that put Indian craftsmen on display for the British gaze.

following the opening, “Dear Kamal,” he recalled how Vreeland profusely thanked him for what “India had brought to New York” through his exhibits at the MoMA and the Cooper Hewitt. In one letter, she proclaimed that his creations were the “best costumes she had ever seen.” He told me that stacked beneath Diana’s slightly yellowing letters was a handwritten note from “Iss” or Issey Miyake, who wrote that the flowers he received as a prize for his work at the opera⁵¹ were a “tribute to India.” Apparently, Miyake’s gratitude was so deep that when *Time* magazine featured the designer on their cover (see below), he chose to wear an Indian textile designed by Kamal’s close affiliate.



TIME Magazine Cover (Time 1986).

As he read this correspondence aloud with great enthusiasm, I noted that Kamal never used the term “fashion” to describe what he and his colleagues were doing. Moreover, Vreeland’s use of the word “costumes” was also telling. It implied that fashion was synonymous with New York—an industry that was separate from, but could be enriched by—textiles and garments or “costumes”

⁵¹ Kamal did not clarify which one.

from the East. Even years later, in a 1997 *New York Times* article that mourned the death of Pupul, Mrs. Gandhi's "teenage friend," the journalist John F. Burns (1997) credits her with "reviving Indian crafts, particularly handicrafts and village arts," through her work in France, the United States, and Japan. Though NIFT was by now a decade old, there was no mention of it. Instead, members of Kamal's "gang" were internationally credited for being ambassadors of Indian culture, and these narratives reveal the hierarchy between craft and fashion.

The power granted to Kamal and "the gang" solidified the relationship between economic power and cultural capital—seen as naturally linked—within the Indian fashion industry (Bourdieu 1984); Kamal's narratives were full of cosmopolitan referents. After describing a show in Berlin, he would skip to the Gateway of India where he claimed, "twenty thousand people came [to a costume gala] for free, and the dressing rooms consisted of five floors at the Taj Hotel."⁵² He emphasized that all these ventures were executed via an economy of favors, rather than through economic capital: "We didn't have more than a few pennies in our pocket and it was good will and friendship we ran on." His explanations, however, revealed the immense cultural capital that grounded these alliances. Because of the close connections between "the gang" and the government, the state was also the primary sponsor of spectacles, and did not require more than a nod from Mrs. Gandhi to release funds for them. Moreover, absent in Kamal's accounts of this period is an acknowledgement of mass disruptions and unrest in the rest of the country (Guha 2008; Tarlo 2003).

The aim of these projects, according to Kamal, was to show the West the "real India" through publicizing Indian artisans and their crafts. In so doing, these projects had an air of democracy to them, while remaining grounded in inequities. For example, in recounting their trips to Paris with Indian craftsmen, the gang reaffirmed the divide between their own positions vis-à-vis the lower class artisans, whom they considered "lucky" to be traveling with them. When I asked

⁵² A luxury hotel in which the cost of a room begins at four hundred dollars a night.

about the logistics of transporting craftsmen who had presumably never left their villages in India to European cities, Kamal told me: “In the end, they [the craftsmen] asked us why there was not a single dark-haired person in Paris, for all they saw was mice-colored heads from the windows of their hotel rooms” (Interview, February 1st, 2014). He laughed, but his anecdote revealed the craftsmen’s marginalization within this process. These figures who represented “the purest products of pre-industrial India” (Mathur 2007:46) and who were ostensibly the center of these displays, were presumably never allowed to venture out in public. As Kuldova (2013) and others have pointed out, their bodies were considered polluted, while their work was paradoxically celebrated. As such, the gang’s power was constituted through its appropriation of objects, figures, and ideas that historically represented a “pure” and “authentic” India. Their hegemonic power depended on gatekeeping Indian craft and textiles, a process applauded by their counterparts in the West.

Thus, even in contemporary settings, including in Veena’s classroom, the discourse of “returning” to handloom and textile carries with it this particular historical and cultural privilege. For instance, in an interview with Sathya Saran, ex-editor of *Femina* magazine⁵³ and a self-confessed craft revivalist, she told me: “In the 1970s, saris still felt like handloom.⁵⁴ Today, saris just feel like...I don’t know, do young girls even know what saris feel like anymore?” (Phone Interview, September 18, 2012). Even though saris have been innovatively re-appropriated and romanticized in the current market—especially by the rise of bridal wear—and many ready-to-wear designers experiment with traditional Indian crafts and textiles,⁵⁵ her emphasis on the word “feeling” is telling; it describes not

⁵³ *Femina* is India’s most widely read and circulated Women’s Lifestyle Magazine.

⁵⁴ In 1976, the focus on Indian handloom and textile also made the opening of the extremely successful American-backed retail store Fab India, possible. This outlet propagated the mission of preserving Indian handloom and textile from its very inception. Their commitment to 100% handcrafted clothing is now controversial. However, Fab India was particularly iconic for the flower-power generation that thrived in Delhi University (Singh 2010).

⁵⁵ The brand 11.11 is a good example of this. They are known for their experiments in a new material they call denim khadi.

only a changing sartorial trend but also hints at the simultaneous dilution of hegemonic power,⁵⁶ and the “emergence” of a new structure (Williams 1976).

Specifically, Saran’s statement bemoans the standardization of the powerloom as a more efficient mode of production that exacerbated the loss of a particular “feeling,” represented by Kamal and the gang. In the mid-1980s,⁵⁷ machine production began to displace highly skilled craftsmen, leading to their mass unemployment (Singh 2010). In response, many *kargiars* (craftsmen) shifted into other small, entrepreneurial businesses—a move that today’s top bridal wear designers continue to mourn (“Conscious,” 2015). To counter this shift, many for-profit enterprises and NGOs—established by privileged men and women—were set up to revive “disappearing” Indian craft and textile traditions. During fieldwork, I visited Sally Holkar’s⁵⁸ NGO, The Rehwa Society, in Maheshwar, Indore—a successful and well-respected organization that has been instrumental in reviving the region’s handloom silk production. Holkar is one of the best examples of India’s handloom revivalists and is credited for increasing employment through her initiatives (Chowdhry 2013).

However, despite efforts to promote handloom, it struggles to match the affordability of powerloom, which lends itself to branded, mass produced, ready-to-wear fashion (Mazzarella 2003; Khare and Rakesh 2010). As I will discuss, the rise of the machine-made, ready-to-wear garment, which began to reshape Indian fashion in the 1970s, would further accelerate in the next two decades. For example, in the 1970s, stitched clothing, which was until this point largely restricted to menswear became popularized through the newly trendy *salwar kameez*. From being the dominant

⁵⁶ At this point, many would raise textile designer Sanjay Garg as an exception. His label RAW MANGO is celebrated by many of Delhi socialites for its successful revival of handloom saris.

⁵⁷ As indicated in the introduction, the Indian government created a policy in light of this shift called The Handloom Act in 1985. This act created a reservation for certain items—such as *saris* and *dhobis*—to be produced by handloom instead of powerloom. However, as a recent article that calls for “revisiting” this policy suggests, “even in 1985, this was an impossible act to comply with” (“Reservations,” 2012).

⁵⁸ Holkar set up the non-profit Rehwa society in 1978. In 2003, she set up WomenWeave, a charitable trust to support weavers.

choice of clothing for Muslim women, the garment also began to gain favor among Hindu women, and for some, became a threat to the unstitched, nine-yard sari.⁵⁹ In interviews, many textile designers referred to the “reign of the *salwaar kameez*” in the late 1970s as Indian fashion’s biggest moment. This was largely because the garment offered women freedom from the laborious chores of washing, ironing, and draping, which saris demand. However, for some designers, by the mid-1980s, *not* being able to make anything but the *salwaar kameez* to sustain a profitable business became a burden. Testing the limits of creativity for many designers, the *salwar kameez* went through nearly half a dozen variations over a few years (Castellino 1994:80). As we will see in Chapter Two, this is the same problem that marks bridal wear today.



An ad for Tareeka Sarees featured in *Stardust* (a popular magazine for Bollywood news) states: “Nothing makes a woman more than her heritage.” This slogan uses the sari as a symbol for cultural

⁵⁹ To date, many businesses only consider the sari, and not the *salwaar kameez*, acceptable clothing for their female employees.

capital and positions it in opposition to the assumed lack of “heritage” associated with stitched garments (Stardust 1981).

The 1980s: the beginning of NIFT and the invention of the Indian designer

Fashion was formalized in India in the mid-1980s. As Castelino and others remind us, “while the Indian fashion awakening may have taken place in the 50s, it was the 80s that made an impact on the designer charts” (1994:80). This period coincided with what Mazzarella describes as a “a series of economic reforms, implemented under the banners of “liberalization” and subsequently, “globalization” that brought a movement toward a new, externally oriented, consumption led path to national prosperity” (2003:5). Lifestyle publications regularly advertised huge, international brands such as Van Heusen, Zodiac, and Louis Philippe that entered the market in 1987. Along with these, ads for Singer sewing machines reinforced the idea of producing fast, cheap, and mass-produced garments for the growing Indian middle class. However, while the formalization of fashion was publically portrayed as good for Indian middle class consumers, the priority was boosting the nation’s economy by increasing export production.

As such, NIFT, India’s first fashion institute, was imagined as making garment producers—not consumers—out of the middle class. In 1986, the Ministry of Textiles—still led by Mrs. Pupal Jayakar—redirected funds from earlier missions “reviving” Indian craft to now build a strong, “professional” fashion industry. The scale imagined for NIFT was shocking at the time, particularly because until this point, export demands were largely met through family-run cotton mills.⁶⁰ However, trusting Kamal and the “gang” and extending their influence, Rajiv Gandhi tasked the group with building NIFT, which began as a two-room center in the shopping arcade of Delhi’s Samrat Hotel. Moreover, as Catelino notes, Rajiv Gandhi’s own sartorial image, which was associated with luxurious items like Gucci shoes and suave Nehru jackets, cast him as the

⁶⁰ Many of the highest selling Indian designers in the market today continue to follow the family business model dominant in the cotton mill industries. See Chapter Three.

appropriate leader to take fashion forward (Castelino 1994:61). A celebratory article written by the journalist Tavleen Singh announced the opening of NIFT:

In the shopping arcade of New Delhi's Samrat Hotel, an institute is slowly taking shape, which could alter the entire character of the Indian garment industry. The National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), which when it opens in January will be India's first fashion institute, does not look like much at the moment. But if things go according to plan, it could one day produce an Indian Kenzo or an Issey Miyake [Singh 1986].

The article went on to describe the first courses offered by the university. To further understand NIFT's opening in 1986, Veena advised me to speak with Rathi Vinay Jha—at least an affiliate member of Kamal's "gang"—and Asha Baxi, a faculty member hired under her guidance. I gained access to both fairly easily, largely because I share their positionality as highly educated, upper middle class women.

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SHEILA DIKSHIT EXPORTING FASHION
by Vinod Bahl

With well over 700 garment exporters based in Delhi, it is really getting high on the fashion scene. And the fact that 60% of the country's total garment export is done by Delhi, is itself a clear pointer to the fact that it is making waves on the fashion scene.

Today India is exporting fashion garments worth over Rs. 500 crores per year as against Rs. 156 crores in 1976. The credit for this export boom goes to the Garment Exporters' Association, which has brought export promotion into the country by making the buyer come to India. And it is here that Sheila Dikshit, Secretary of the Association, is making her contribution.

"Ours is really a fashion oriented industry. The fact that we have managed to sell our fashion garments to sophisticated western women is itself a big achievement," says Sheila. We are still getting high prices because of the high quality of our garments," she adds.

Sheila, however, feels there is immediate competition from countries like Hongkong, Taiwan, Korea, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka because of the cheaper labour there. "Although we cannot be beaten in cotton garments, it is in the interest of the trade that to compete with lower prices the fabric should be supplied indigenously. And for that there is a need to organise our handloom industry," she says.

Sheila suggests that we should lay more emphasis on sending industrial and classical garments, which are always in vogue. "And to compete with other countries, we are already laying emphasis on winter and autumn garments which have so far been neglected by us. This time we are expecting a record 400 buyers to attend the Autumn and Winter garments fair she says.

Sheila who has been working hard to seek assistance from the government and other agencies to remove bottlenecks in the trade, says that although the government support is inadequate and inconsistent. "We cannot all back on progress made during the last decade. And with unlimited funds and resources, we cannot keep pace with the growing competition," she feels.

Sheila thinks that besides consistent and adequate help from the government, the need of the hour is to set up a fashion institute to keep pace with the changing trends in the world of fashion.

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Page 18 THE SUN

An article from *The Sun* (1982) discusses the rise of the Indian fashion export sector. The first lines of the article states, "With well over 700 garment exporters based in Delhi, it is really getting high on the fashion scene."

Mrs. Jha welcomed me into her spacious apartment in Gurgaon's luxurious Le Bournam Complex on two occasions. Mrs. Baxi, who requested I call her by her first name, Asha, preferred to talk while walking in South Delhi's beautiful Lodi Gardens. The first time we met, she mentioned that her stories would begin before "things really went haywire at NIFT" (Interview, January 6, 2013). During our first walk, I wondered: what went haywire and for whom? Both Asha and Rathi assumed that I knew what they meant, given our shared class positionality. As such, they were reluctant to explain this to me in great detail. While our similar subject positions gave me easy access to them, it also meant that things were taken for granted and I was not always able to find competing or alternative narratives. Aside from the phone number of one retired faculty member the NIFT librarian secretly handed me, I had no luck. Unfortunately, the number was out of service. To me, the difficulty of stepping outside of the "gang" or its legacy—even in 2013—also spoke to the immense discursive power they continued to enjoy.

According to Asha, the "gang" essentially handpicked the students who filled NIFT's first seats. Nevertheless, the selection process was elaborate: it consisted of situation tests, personality quizzes, and drawing examinations. Rathi confirmed that the logic was to "select not only intelligent students, but interesting students as well" (Interview, January 18, 2013). By "interesting," Rathi meant they were looking for cosmopolitanism, evident in the fact that fluent English was a major deciding factor. As a result, these "rigorous" tests were highly skewed: in the first years of NIFT, hardly any students came from lower-caste or lower-class backgrounds.⁶¹

The identity of the middle class Indian designer was imagined along Western, and specifically, American lines. Because of this, Asha and Rathi's narratives showed that the "new"

⁶¹ Inequalities continue even in the present NIFT demographic, where 30% of admitted students currently fulfill quotas for The Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes (STSC), a category the British formally designated as the "depressed castes" (Jafferlot 2006). These quotas refer to reservation in India. This form of affirmative action involves reserving a certain percentage of seats (vacancies) in government institutions for members of backward and under-represented communities (defined primarily by caste and tribe). Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) are supposed to be the primary beneficiaries of the reservation policies.

Indian designer had to be invented from scratch: “One had to assume no knowledge of design even though we already had it,” Asha explained (Interview, January 6, 2013). Draping her cream-colored *khadi* sari over her shoulder, Rathi took over:

We had no real such thing as a designer-designer at that time. We, of course, were the nation of *darzis* (tailors), so that is what partially attracted the Americans to us, and it was the Americans that we needed to satisfy. You know the Americans [she waved her hand at me]; they are all about marketing. But, *darzis were not seen as professional designers* [my emphasis]. They were just seen as people who stitch basic stuff or are able to copy designs from magazines. For Indians to learn what a professional designer was all about, we had to go to FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology) in New York and collaborate with them. There we saw their classrooms, sat in their lectures, and did full courses so that we could come back to India and say, okay, this is fashion, this is what being a designer is all about.

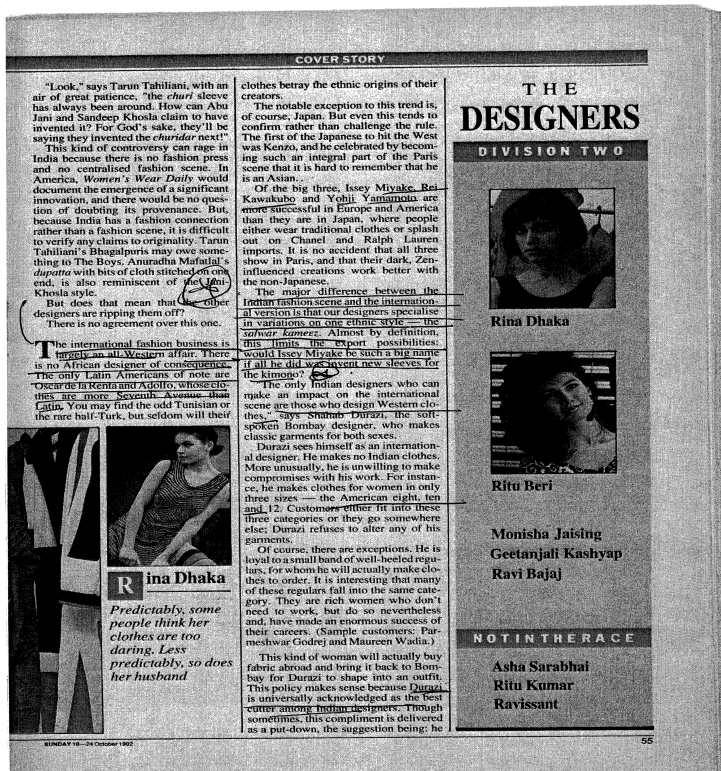
[Interview, January 18, 2013]

As Rathi indicates, she participated in a process where Indian fashion was marked as distinct from craft, textile, and the association of Indians as *darzis* (tailors). Still, despite her skepticism about the premise of the “new” Indian designer, Rathi’s humorous stories about navigating New York in lavish saris were light-hearted (“we of course were a nation of *darzis*”); the duality of enjoyment and discomfort was present throughout, giving her stories about Indian fashion in the 1980s a particularly contradictory feel. Because of the hold FIT had over NIFT, the “professional” designer label was only awarded to Indians if they could replicate what was projected as “American fashion.” In the late 1980s, this meant that middle class NIFT students made a great amount of Western sportswear, and ready-to-wear clothing. Rapidly expanding American companies such as Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger depended on outsourcing production in order to follow the consumer demand for the fast and cheap (Kondo 1997). At this point, Indian pattern making was still a far-off idea and would only be formally introduced into the curriculum in 1992. Thus, the establishment of

the Indian designer was ironic given that this profession was meant to undo associations with the *darzi*, who merely copied designs.

Overall, Asha framed the 1980s as a decade when Indians were “hand held by the Americans.” To emphasize this, Rathi and Asha on separate occasions each made sure I knew that at the NIFT student fashion show in 1990, the student collections consisted entirely of Western wear: everyone made denim, mini skirts, and leather dresses. “Even the scales [rulers] that were used would come from Florida and would cost eight dollars,” Asha told me, emphasizing the dependence on foreign resources. She stated: “When we tried to use our own sensibilities, we were told by the Mr. Johns and Mrs. Janes that Indian design had everything on it, except the kitchen sink,” mockingly invoking clichéd American names⁶² to drive her point home.

⁶² “John and Jane” was also the title of a documentary film by Ashim Ahluwalia about the American control over Indian call centers.



An article in the Sunday magazine discusses the *salwar kameez* as a limit. It states: "The major difference between the Indian fashion scene and the international version is that our designers specialize in variations on one ethnic style—the *salwar kameez*. Almost by definition, this limits the export possibilities. Would Issey Miyake be such a big name if all he did was invent new sleeves for the kimono? (The Fashion Connection 1992).

In describing NIFT's student body in its early years, both Asha and Rathi recalled that students had to convince their parents that they were not becoming *darzis*. Asha told me: "We couldn't have these students [many of whom were coming from upper-middle-class backgrounds] say, "*ki, mummy, mein silai sikhne jara boon*" [Mom, I am learning how to sew]" (Interview, January 6, 2013). For many of NIFT's first students who had cultural capital, a career in fashion had to be justified. Asha elaborated: "These students were coming from a generation and from good families where their parents gave them two options—become a doctor or lawyer. Fashion designer was not an option. You can say that for many, being a designer still had that *darzi* complex" (Interview, January 6, 2013). In another interview, the Sikh designer JJ Valaya also remembered how much he

struggled to convince his father, who was in the Army, that paying for his education in fashion design was worthwhile. “This *darzi* complex was particularly hard-hitting for middle-class men who were expected to support their families” (Interview, February 28, 2015), Valaya said.⁶³



An image from JJ Valaya’s personal archive. Featured here is the Sikh designer, surrounded by those whom he considered some of his “favorite models.” In the message to which this photograph was attached Valaya wrote: “As you can see, Indian fashion had a totally different ring to it...” He went on explain how the industry was small and family-like. [Personal Correspondence, May 1, 2015].

The phrase “*darzi* complex” indicates how the figure of the tailor continued to haunt the new designer identity being cultivated at NIFT. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, for middle-class students, failure was equated with being nothing more than *darzi*; consequently, the designer identity was shaped via a psychological complex that deemed the identity not *darzi* but not quite American designer. Meanwhile, the figure of the craftsman was romanticized but kept separate from fashion; for elites like Kamal and the gang, the super-specialized skills craftsmen possessed were distinct from the modern, creative, and productive approach Indian designers were supposed to

⁶³ Some designers speculate that the difficulty of actually supporting families through work in fashion is why makes many top producers are gay, and without children.

have. “One can say the *karigars* [craftsmen] didn’t really have anything to do with fashion directly,” Rathi confirmed. In other words, to be a designer was to be formally trained and part of a mass-producing industry; this was the antithesis of craft that represented handwork, customization, and authenticity.

Despite being the gatekeepers of both Indian fashion and craft, the designs produced by NIFT students did not receive the same passionate defense from Kamal and the gang as did the “homegrown” Indian textiles and craft. Thus, although Kamal and the gang were tasked with inventing Indian fashion, they maintained a personal and aesthetic distance from what they saw as mass-produced, ready-to-wear Indian fashion. For example, there was a discrepancy between their own, personal sartorial style and what NIFT students were tasked with producing. In the narratives I gathered, Kamal and his gang expressed personal preferences for hand-woven *khadi* or handloom products and textiles,⁶⁴ rather than the Western, machine-made garments. When I queried Veena about the difference between “the gang’s” own sartorial preferences and these public images of fashion, she explained:

Their [the gang’s] niche vision of preserving textile and craft did not really translate into the curriculum. It was clear from the very beginning that NIFT was for ready-to-wear, machine-made export and export only. It was to train a large manpower of middle class Indians to make Western garments. [Interview, August 3, 2013]

Moreover, gatekeeping Indian fashion did not prevent “the gang” from preserving their niche vision. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they established museums, such as the Crafts Museum⁶⁵ in New Delhi and the Calico Museum in Ahmedabad, to this end. By spearheading a craft revival—through museums and preservation programs—the “gang” moved between craft and

⁶⁴ While I never ended up visiting Kamal’s home, several people who knew him well described it to me dreamily, as “all white,” and “full of Indian craft.”

⁶⁵ In April 2015, e-mails circulated between “the gang” about news of the institution’s shutdown. Not surprisingly, Kamal was very active on this thread.

fashion, while they expected NIFT's middle-class students to remain strictly associated with the latter. The historian Soumhya Venkatesan has similarly described how the elite have historically constructed "craft worlds" to maintain and reify their positions of privilege. Venkatesan states:

The idea of traditional Indian craft originates from a disparate grouping of influential people including politicians, thinkers, members of development organizations and other urban elites. I refer to this grouping as 'craft worlds.' The interests that members of the craft world have in Indian craft are varied, even contradictory.... While influential non-state actors in the craft world may be high caste, they are almost always high class with a history of support for culture, or wealthy and well connected.

[Venkatesan 2009:79]

Through Venkatesan's observations, we see how "the gang" exemplifies this elite, well-connected and wealthy group. As she points out, the historically "varied" and "even contradictory" interests they had in saving craft helps explain the "gang's" role in building NIFT. Through these initiatives, they celebrated the work of lower-caste craftsmen *and* invested in the mission of creating ready-to-wear fashion for the middle class—projects that were seen as incommensurate with each other.

While craft allowed the elite to enjoy the one-of-a-kind luxury that artisanal products offered—and to "save" the craftsmen who made them—pioneering the middle-class project of Indian fashion allowed them to vouch for a modern middle-class India. However, they remained the gatekeepers of both efforts.

The birth of Indian "high" fashion

At the turn of the decade—around 1988—the identity of the ideal Indian designer changed, partly in response to the return of non-resident, high-caste, Indian elites to India. Also, NRI designers occupied an ambiguous place in relation to the gang: they were closely affiliated with the "gang" in terms of cultural and economic capital, but also did something radically different—they blurred fashion and craft, calling it Indian High Fashion.

Elizabeth Chako (2007) argues that by the early 1990s, there was a shift from “brain drain”—a phenomenon that referred to highly skilled knowledge workers re-locating from East to West in the 1970s and 1980s—to “brain gain.” Many non-resident Indians (NRIs) who were part of this movement saw promise in the industry and refashioned themselves into entrepreneurs. The best example of this trend is Wharton graduate Tarun Tahiliani, who specializes in bridal wear and continues to be one of India’s highest-earning designers. Without any training in fashion design, he set up a high-end fashion store called Ensemble in Mumbai in 1987, encouraging designers who would become part of the “brain gain” movement to join the fashion industry.⁶⁶ Others, such as Bina Ramani, also untrained in fashion, returned from Europe and helped transform the rural space of Hauz Khas Village into a trendy shopping destination for Indian elites and foreign tourists. In some of the oral histories that I collected from NIFT faculty and students, *this* is the moment when Indian high fashion—an industry synonymous with the elite fetish for rural India, artisanal products and a sanitized version of village life—began. As Emma Tarlo argues, the foreign-returned designer with high cultural capital gave rise to the phenomenon of “ethnic chic” in the 1990s, which depended on curating craft. This aesthetic project aligned itself with the historical mission of “salvaging” craft and “reviving” Indian textiles, rather than bolstering the production of the machine-made garment.

Thus, those who returned to India indirectly worked against the NIFT agenda. This move was another example in which the elite usurped power from professionally trained middle class designers. Neither Tahiliani nor Ramani, who were becoming important household names, were “professional” designers. Yet, unlike NIFT designers who had to be taught (or taught to mimic)

⁶⁶ In an interview for *Forbes* magazine, Tahiliani stated: “I started Ensemble in 1987 with my wife to promote the best of Indian design because I thought it was odd that forty years after independence we were still sending our best products abroad” (“Tarun,” 2015).

American tastes, those who came back to India, or the most privileged who were already here, were perceived to naturally possessed taste (Personal Correspondence, April 20, 2014). Castelino states:

In spite of fashion being taught in a more organized manner in these institutes, many foreign trained designers feel that the Indian institutes barely skim the surface of the profession...The fashion houses with their exotic foreign-trained designers called these new fashion usurpers gauche. [1994:30]

Thus, while Indian fashion institutes like NIFT legitimized the profession for the expanding middle class, elite designers continued to dominate the industry, both in terms of garnering the most attention and in terms of economic success. During this period, the price of Indian high fashion also increased considerably. As Shagun Khanna, OGAAN's retail manager, told me, "It was the first time women could think about paying 5,000 [rupees] for a lightly worked on *kurta* set" (Interview, November 11, 2014). Other accounts showed how this first batch of high-fashion stores in India could make up to Rs.30,000 in a few hours, while other stores struggled to reach this figure over weeks (Castelino 1994:30). Given that a largely untrained, but privileged elite became constituted a part of India's most famous designers, we might ask: What was the relationship between ready-to-wear, Western garments and the "new" sector of Indian high fashion? What was the role of the established elite in the face of this "new" economic sector? What did you really need to succeed? The safety net that family money offered, talent, or both?



OGAAN, a few years after it opened in Hauz Khas Village. The building is now white.⁶⁷



An image of a popular magazine cover (Sunday 1992).

These tensions shaped the landscape of the industry in the following years, and posed a challenge to how fashion had been defined by “the gang.” NIFT faced backlash for claiming to open

⁶⁷ I thank Aashti Bhartia for this image.

up fashion to the middle classes while remaining a site of “trained” *darzis*, who would end up working—but not designing for—export houses. Meanwhile, the faculty and students admitted to NIFT remained middle or upper class. None of the “gang” or their affiliates whom I interviewed could recall one faculty member who was not high caste in NIFT’s early years. One faculty member justified this logic by saying: “When we were trying to tell parents that it was okay for their child to be a designer, having a Dalit faculty member wouldn’t exactly help, right?” (Interview, January 6th, 2013). In the following decade, however, the high-caste, mostly female professors at NIFT were forced to put aside their class and caste biases and open up their classrooms to include the “new” (lower-caste) middle class. As I show, unfortunately, this change had little impact on creating caste and class equality in classrooms.

The 1990s and the Making of The Globalized Indian Designer

While describing fashion in the early 1990s, many of my informants used the language of “crisis.” This language is also present in accounts of liberalization reforms, implemented out of necessity during this same period (Dasgupta 2014; Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan 2011). However, a few of my informants also referred to this period as one of “reform.” As I will show, this language was one of the ways that historically privileged actors distinguished themselves from the “new” middle class (Brosius 2010; Fernandes and Heller 2006; Lakha 1999) or the “zippies,” towards whom the promise of liberalization was directed (Lukose 2009). This mapped on to the difference between who privileged actors thought to naturally embody taste, versus those who had to be taught or trained.

From 1990-1992, NIFT was shut down for two years, and no new admissions were accepted. This “crisis” was read as an effect of “elitism” and “oligarchy” in the words of my informants and in the popular press. Rathi explained:

With the onset of liberalization, our mission at NIFT was seen as elitist. Gone was Mrs. Gandhi and in were the beer belly exporters. And so, NIFT was basically shut down in the early 1990s, and this signaled a huge crisis for all of fashion and those involved in it. I had to fight with a Gandhian economist. We had to *democratize* fashion. That was the solution. We had to justify: how could we spend so much money on fashion in a country where people didn't have their next meal?" [January 18, 2013]

For Rathi, NIFT in the early 1990s was clearly in a state of crisis. The “beer belly exporters” referenced Punjabi farmers who took advantage of some of Mrs. Gandhi’s initiatives—such as the Green Revolution⁶⁸—and moved into bigger industries such as garment export (Leaf 1984). “This is when the market [became] West Delhi,”⁶⁹ she explained. Moreover, embedded in Rathi’s anxiety was not just that there were more Indians who would become designers, but also that those who were relegated to produce fashion now also had the power to consume it.

For Kamal, the emergence of “new” middle-class consumers led to his “last love affair with fashion.” In 1992, as his last exhibition, he once again brought the Indian craftsman to the forefront by showcasing Mrs. Gandhi’s iconic sari drapes. Remembering the exhibition, he said:

That was my swan song, for I could never work with anything except *khadi* again. And I told Pupul, ‘I want bus loads of blind children to come to the exhibition.’ She organized it. And it broke my heart when one of them came up to me and said: ‘Uncle, *khadi* feels like the wings of a dragonfly.’

This memory made Kamal teary.⁷⁰ Again, Kamal’s personal loss of power was symbolized by a handwoven product that represented the antithesis of machine-made, mass-produced fashion. His poetic re-telling, of “blind children” who could feel *khadi* and associated it with flight,

⁶⁸ The Green Revolution in India began in the 1960s with the introduction of high-yield crops.

⁶⁹ For many of my South Delhi, upper-class informants, “West Delhi” represents the antithesis of “real” fashion even though it had been established as a highly lucrative market. West Delhi consumers were stereotyped as rich but tasteless. Though an ethnography on West Delhi fashion is a different project altogether, my preliminary questions to designers about West Delhi revealed an association between taste (or its perceived lack) and caste.

⁷⁰ Kamal executed another *khadi* exhibition in 2002, which he told reporters was to re-create a “fading public memory.”

communicated the way that this fabric had become a mark of privilege. However, for him, while this moment represented the end of Indian fashion, for hundreds of others, it represented the beginning.

For others in the “gang”—such as Rathi—NIFT had to be “saved” and the crisis had to be resolved. In contrast to Kamal’s nostalgic approach, Rathi and others pinpointed “democratization” as the solution to the crisis in 1993. This plan explicitly threatened the monopoly that Kamal and his gang had enjoyed. Thus, even today, Kamal remembers this moment as a kind of “betrayal.” He stated: “When Rathi told me that we were opening more and more centers across India and there would be so many NIFTs, I called her a betrayer. This was not the agreement we had with the Americans” (Interview, March 17, 2014).⁷¹

“Democratization” meant a necessary and aggressive expansion of NIFTs all across India, a project that by 2014 totaled seventeen centers. Rathi explained “democratization” as “India coming into her own” or turning “Indian fashion into a market made by Indians, for Indians” (Interview, January 18, 2013). While Rathi presented this as a “good thing,” as Castelino writes, by “the 1990s, 500 designers were being churned out a year, and they all wanted to grab the big bucks, and not all of them were necessarily creative” (1994:70). However, despite these veiled sentiments, which some of the “gang” shared, steps to open up the institute were implemented as planned. As Rathi describes, these years were led by the single obligation of “having to cash in on the Indian.” This phrase meant that the previously marginalized low-caste, low-class, rural citizens who were now part of a “new” middle class could now also access Indian fashion.

The biggest step in “cashing in” was creating quotas for students from STSC backgrounds, an effort that meant expanding the “gang’s” idea of the future designer. For students who struggled to pass the preliminary entrance tests, night classes and other less prestigious courses became

⁷¹ I was not able to get more information about the “agreement” Kamal and others originally made with “The Americans.” However, I suspect that in the early days, the members of FIT promised “the gang” ownership over Indian fashion as long as it was limited to a small-scale industry.

available. As one of NIFT's first graduates explained: "programs like these gave the wannabes a foot in the door" (Personal Correspondence, January 3, 2015). However, as Guha notes (2008), despite the implementation of quotas, forward castes like Brahmins, Kayasths and Baniyas⁷² who historically enjoyed a monopoly over literacy, scholarship, and commerce, continued to enjoy their historical advantages. The fashion industry was no exception: even today, many of the top designers are from high-caste Baniya or Marwari families.⁷³

One of the main advantages wealthy, high-caste designers enjoyed over NIFT-trained designers was their ability to employ several craftsmen on a full-time, exclusive basis. This gave them a great advantage over fledgling designers who were more susceptible to both being plagiarized and accused of non-creativity because they were forced to share resources. Up to twelve designers often shared the same roster of craftsmen (Castelino 1994:70). However, while Castelino's account locates plagiarism as a problem that middle class designers had to contend with in the 1990s, today it is perceived to affect only top designers; I regularly found that complaining about plagiarism was a way of marking success.⁷⁴

The mid-1990s and "Cashing In"

By the mid-1990s, NIFT's expansion—or its "democratization"—was declared a huge success. "Democratization" represented a shift in fashion, and it was achieved in a few different ways: opening multiple NIFTs across tier one and tier two cities,⁷⁵ standardizing a syllabus across fifteen urban centers, and introducing Indian Pattern Making as a required course. In 1992, Rathi

⁷² Designers often stereotyped Baniya clients as wealthy and eager to spend, though also price-conscious and difficult to please. Some of India's richest businessmen and moneylenders, including Mukesh Ambani, Lakshmi Mittal and KM Biral, also belong to this caste.

⁷³ See Chapter Three for a lengthier discussion on the dominance of Baniya families in the fashion business.

⁷⁴ As Shefalee Vasudev's book notes, Tarun Tahiliani is one of the most prominent designers to be engaged in this war against plagiarism (2012:14). However, there is also a well-known story about the highest retailing designer Sabyasachi Mukhejee, who is rumored to have gone undercover into a Calcutta-based black market filled with Sabyasachi goods. However, what was perhaps more powerful than these stories was the rumor that both designers—among others—were the biggest plagiarists who regularly stole from young, unknown producers whom they didn't consider designers. I did not have enough evidence to confirm this, but found the discourse fascinating.

⁷⁵ This is a classification system used by the government to rank cities. The rank is based on a combination of population and the city's financial strength.

and others also added a mandatory Craft Cluster to the degree requirements. Rathi explained that this six-week program assigned students to “different craft communities” or groups of rural artisans across the country. The goal for students was to help rural craftsmen innovate existing craft traditions based on their expertise as designers. However, as one faculty member remembered, this is when NIFT’s approach to fashion turned “schizophrenic.” She recounted how, on the one hand, students were encouraged to make “Benetton-like clothing,”⁷⁶ and on the other, they were told to “praise the *kurta*, *dhoti* and *sari*” (Personal Communication, January 6th 2014).⁷⁷ As such, designers felt the need to both produce Western, ready-to-wear goods for export—in which they were trained—and to revive Indian craft. I suggest the latter was an effect of the “ethnic chic” phenomenon that was gaining increasing popularity.

In 1998, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s “Swadeshi Reawakening” campaign further reshaped fashion. This socio-political movement revived the Gandhian philosophy of nationalism and self-reliance, but this time reconciled it with globalization. The elections of 1998, in which the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) earned a majority, heralded a market that was pro-Indian without being anti-foreign. These political and economic shifts were directed at Indians who could be both local and global at the same time (Mazzarella 2003). Mazzarella argues that for the middle-class Indian consumer, this moment represented a major shift: he, not the producer, was the final arbitrator of the new global commodity.

In fashion, these shifts were felt in the Fashion Design Council of India’s organizing of bi-annual fashion weeks in Delhi in order to create an equal marketplace for Indian and foreign buyers (Sengupta 2005). FDCI promised designers that they could showcase Indian fashion on the ramp

⁷⁶ Reference to the United Colors of Benetton T-shirts that through the 1990s, were important status symbols for Indian youth.

⁷⁷ In 1990, Ritu Kumar produced her famous *Tree of Life* show. This fashion show—which traveled across the globe—was focused on the display and revival of Indian craft. Many of my informants still remember it as the most important and spectacular show in the history of Indian fashion. This show was further evidence of how Indian craft and textile continued to occupy a more important space than the mass-produced, machine-made garment that was synonymous with NIFT.

and foreign buyers from the best stores in the world would come and purchase their goods. Still, most fashion designers produced what was categorized as “fusion,” or globally inspired clothing, rather than the highly ornamental “Indian” bridal couture that would dominate the runways a full decade later (Castelino 1994). The apparent reconciliation of binaries—such as Indian versus Western and tradition versus modernity—was also evident in glitzy billboards featuring the cosmopolitan yet traditional Indian bride as a non-paradoxical subject. Many of my informants also remembered “Style Guru,” a popular TV show featuring the designer Suneet Varma, as thrusting Indian fashion into contemporary popular culture.

For NIFT’s students—who until now imagined themselves as producers of fashion who made garments according to Western demands, liberalization also offered the possibility of aesthetic independence. For students at NIFT, this meant a potential career shift from export designer to autonomous producer. However, despite the promises of “democratization” within and without the fashion industry, NIFT is still a ground upon which privilege and power is played out to distinguish certain actors from others. In the ethnographic excerpt below, I touch on some of the “residual” (Williams 1976) effects of democratization in a NIFT classroom. However, in examining these effects, I also note the shifts that have taken place since the 1970s: for example, while Kamal and the “gang” are no longer the visible and major architects of Indian fashion, the system of inequality they introduced continues to remake itself in new ways.



A photograph of the NIFT campus, New Delhi (College Dunia n.d.)

NIFT 2012

NIFT's New Delhi campus is located in Hauz Khas. It consists of an impressive building with sky-lit libraries, gardens, and cafeterias. Reportedly, Kamal and the “gang” have not set foot on this campus for years. This was not accidental; according to Veena, the “umbilical cord”—the link between “the gang” and the state—was cut when the Indian state decided to stop funding NIFT in 2006. Between 2007-8, NIFT was privatized. When I asked how national politics affected the institute now, Veena bemoaned the fact that there was no “real” connection between national politics and NIFT any longer. For her, this change from public to private university signaled a diminution of her own positionality. However, her explanation excluded reports about the massive state projects that NIFT is still contracted to complete. For instance, a quick Google search revealed that in 2003, NIFT Chennai spearheaded a 25-crore project that aimed to train weavers in skill and design development (“NIFT,” 2003). Thus, rather than reflect fact, I read her mourning of the government's diminishing role in NIFT as another way to express nostalgia for the past.

Because of this continued power upper middle class Indians enjoy in “opening up” Indian fashion, making and re-making NIFT’s public image as “democratic” continues to be something the institute battles with. For example, in 2011, NIFT was (again) portrayed as an elite school that victimized the middle class, thanks in part to the way “democratization” was implemented. National newspapers frequently reported on fee hikes, opening articles with dramatic statements like: “Do you have a fancy car? Then you have the funds to study at NIFT” (“NIFT Loses,” 2013). However, unlike the accusations NIFT had to ward off in the early 1990s, in more recent times, the economic capital required of accepted students, rather than the administration’s political connections, are under attack.

In my own fieldwork, I glimpsed hints of inequality from my first few days on campus. For example, how college students talked about getting to campus was framed as a question about transport but actually reflected class difference. Students who were chauffeured to campus referred to those who traveled by Delhi’s subway system (the Delhi Metro) as the “general quota kids,” or those who paid fees of between Rs. 50,000 rupees a year. I learned that “ST and SC students” paid about half the general quota amount, and mostly resided in the campus hostels. According to the upper-middle and upper-class students I spoke to, the fact that they were “already on campus” symbolized their perceived lack of mobility, economic and otherwise.⁷⁸

Unsurprisingly, sartorial choices were also very important to students. While at first I wasn’t able to visibly identify class differences through clothes, many students told me that you could “see” class. In breaking down apparently visible differences between students who belonged to different quotas, many of my informants suggested that NRI students had a “good aesthetic” and were “chicer,” or more fashionable, than the other students. This “good aesthetic” also translated into the quality of student portfolios they produced.

⁷⁸ In the Fashion Design course of twenty-three students, for example, ten were from the Scheduled Tribe and Caste (STSC) quota. The other ten were from the general quota and three students were from the Non-Resident Indian quota.

Class divides were also reinforced through cultural exchange programs that were meant to flatten them, particularly in terms of creating a “designer” identity imagined as urban, urbane and professional, and distinguished from the rural, provincial, and unprofessional “craftsman.” This divide became clear when I attended student presentations following their return from the Craft Cluster program. Seated in an auditorium full of students and faculty, I watched several videos that projected NIFT students working with rural craftsmen, whom they affectionately referred to as “Aunties” and “Uncles.”⁷⁹ One group featured their weeklong trip to the *parandhi*⁸⁰ craftsman community in Punjab. To an approving group of faculty who made up the panel, the students showed themselves bending down to share images on their iPads with craftsmen. Explaining the presentation, one student declared: “We introduced the concept of color palettes to this community...before this, the colors they were using were kind of outdated” (Field Notes, January 21, 2013). The group went on to show how, with their input, “modern” color combinations like grey and orange could reinvent traditional craft objects. The students received positive feedback from the panel and were awarded high marks for teaching innovation to traditional people. Several other presentations followed in the same vein.

Later in fieldwork, when I had grown more comfortable with the students, I asked them about the application of the Craft Cluster Course and the Indian Pattern Making class in their training. Chitrath, who at this time was a final year student, shared his view, which others echoed: “the Craft Cluster course is just lip service,” he said. “Indian pattern making is an obligation...We, by default, are Western-wear designers” (Interview, March 8, 2013). He cited biologically justified essentialisms and orientalist tropes to support this claim, including the belief that “Indians are better at copying.” I highlight Chitrath’s view because it suggests there was something artificial about what

⁷⁹ See Chapter Three for a discussion on how familial terms exacerbate inequalities.

⁸⁰ The *parandhi* is a decorative hair tassel that is often jeweled and worn by brides.

the “Indianization” of the program meant for lived realities; I suggest “lip service” to craft also referenced the introduction of quotas and programs to make NIFT appear more democratic.

In particular, shifting NIFT from an American-modeled institution to a democratic, Indian institute, and forging the designer identity in opposition to the *darzi*, proved more complicated than envisioned. First, while craft and Western wear now both informed fashion education, the majority of NIFT students still end up working for Euro-American clothing manufacturers, such as American Eagle and The Gap, following what Chitrath calls the “default” plan. These export houses, which are perceived as the back end of Western fashion, continue to be the places with employment opportunities, especially for middle-class students who have tuition loans. Moreover, rather than design or create fashion, students see these spaces as requiring the skills of “copying,” which are associated with *darzis*. As Chitrath elaborated, “While working with craft feels good for everyone, many students can’t afford to risk the slow returns.” Thus, “feeling good” is fleeting for most students who have to deal with financial burdens that loom long after graduation.

However, by 2015—when the promises of e-commerce began to take over the industry—many of my informants felt that their “default training” took on new value. As I elaborate in the Conclusion to this dissertation, online platforms like amazon.in, jabong.com, and myntra.com dramatically increased demands for ready-to-wear, Western clothing. While these new opportunities did not necessarily mean that NIFT graduates would be treated equally, many felt momentarily, though cautiously, in demand again.

Be Professional!

After a few weeks of fieldwork at NIFT, a few professors, including Veena, invited me to be a part of a weekly session called The Jury, held every Wednesday afternoon in a large classroom called Studio One. The Jury monitored thirty final-year students working on their design collections (DCs). The Jury was both the name of the session and the board of faculty that oversaw it. This

board, consisting of four middle-aged female professors and one male assistant, determined the students' progress, which would be permanently inked into a blue, thin pamphlet called the Log Book. I heard that this document could at any time be solicited by the Dean's office, but I never observed such an incident take place.

During my time on the Jury, I went from being a guest of the faculty who was offered multiple cups of *chai* and sugary biscuits, to a student auditing the class. This transition made me more aware of the sociality that marked these sessions. I noted that many times professors acted maternal; for example, they would interrupt presentations to ask about the student's health, they would call many of the students, "child" (*beta* or *beti*),⁸¹ and freely commented on students' appearances, which included making jokes requesting students cut their hair. In return, some students would rest on the jury table as they presented their garments or smile and laugh in response to what the faculty said. One "joke" threatened that students would be charged Rs. 100 for every time they were caught leaning against a sewing machine. Like the formality of the Log Book, I never once saw a fine collected, but stating the rule out loud revealed the amusing discrepancy between prescribed "professional" behavior and the realities of the classroom. With time, I realized that being able to treat these rules light-heartedly was to express privilege; for many of NIFT's wealthy students, Rs. 100 was a throwaway amount.

In the ethnographic excerpt below, I describe the response of a faculty member named Tulika—the youngest woman on the board and also a fellow Ph.D. student—following the "official" presentations of student DCs. Tulika was hired by Veena, and although she was not directly affiliated with the "gang," she was considered well-qualified to teach Indian fashion; this description referenced her UK university qualifications and willingness to teach for a mediocre salary. While gathering the class together to impart a moral lesson seemed to be quite a common

⁸¹ The Hindi word for son or daughter.

practice at NIFT, it always felt a little disjointed from the otherwise casual air the class took on. I suggest this disjoint was rooted in the attempt to shore up the “professional” mandate of the institute that the faculty was charged with implementing. As we will see, these lectures were also a half-hearted attempts to bring equality to a diverse classroom replete with class, gender, and caste inequality. Tulika gathered the class to address what she had thought was an “overall” problem.

Clearing her throat, she said:

Listen here! She was smiling as she commanded attention]. Your job as a professional is to deliver things *on time*. A good designer is someone who makes people want to buy his clothes, and for this they should not have to wait...So whatever it is that people want, you have to understand that, and create it *on time*. [She pointed to the students who didn't have a garment ready to show that week]. No matter how successful you are, and what your garments cost, no boss of yours is going to take the excuses you have given to us today. At least, while you are working, okay? *Jab baada naam mil jayega to jo karna hai karo* [When you make a big name yourself, do what you will]...then maybe people will dance to your brand's tune. But for now, if there is something wrong with the garment, I am going to see this as your responsibility, because that is what your clients will do as well. You have to do the right thing. [Fieldnotes March 9, 2013.]

In Tulika advice to students about how to become “good designers,” I noted several discrepancies between her words and the realities of the classroom. For example, while Tulika defined being “professional” as delivering things “on time,”⁸² only a handful of the classes I observed at NIFT, including hers, began on schedule; a half an hour delay and multiple informal breaks were typical. Moreover, although deadlines were often stated as fixed, they were quite flexible. I became used to seeing faculty informally accept assignments way past their deadlines; further, I recorded plenty of incidents when professors would tuck late assignments into their purses while counseling students.

⁸² Interestingly, this demand of delivering “on time,”—the insistence on punctuality—was also the slogan of a recent advertising campaign created to represent *Indigo*, a low-cost, no-frills airline that strives to meet international standards of excellence. In the clever advertisements, hip, well-dressed Indians are moving like clockwork. Their timeliness is used to indicate the new “professional” but “Indian” attitude that is contrasted with the imagined “wastefulness” of time that marked Indians in the colonial imagination (Jeffery 2010).

However, despite these maternal acts that almost all students benefited from outside of classrooms, the supposedly uniform “professional” education they received cemented divisions between them. For instance, Tulika’s distinction between becoming a “brand” or “big,” versus being “professional” or “working for someone,” was loaded with class connotations. In Tulika’s statement, the “freedom to do what you want,” or being a “brand” references a break from being middle class which has less to do with leisure, choice, and the ability to consume, and more to do with conformity, “no excuses,” and being “on time” (cf. Mazzarella 2003; Lukose 2009). Further, although Tulika directed her advice to all her students, it was of variable relevance. As we will see, being able to disregard the importance of lectures like these was a way some students asserted their privilege.

Thus, Tulika’s evocation of professionalization in terms of adhering to the client’s wishes and maintaining strict temporal horizons veiled caste, gender, and class inequalities that emerged as key determinants of success both inside and outside of NIFT. Moreover, as we will see in Chapter Four, Tulika’s promised “freedom” is also illusory for most designers working in the high fashion marketplace.

Postgraduate Realities 2014-2015

To understand how ideologies about “professionalism” that Tulika and other faculty casually enforced manifested for NIFT alumni, I followed students through their final semesters until after graduation. My findings, which I share below, confirm the main arguments of this chapter: 1) class and caste continue to be the main determinants of success for students during and after NIFT and 2) the elitism that marked Indian fashion pre-NIFT continues to produce historical and new forms of inequality.

A few months after Chitrath graduated, I spotted him at Delhi Fashion Week. He was with two classmates—Prakriti and Seema—whom I also knew, though less well. All three had just

watched a fashion show⁸³ and happily agreed to talk over coffee, while waiting for the next one to begin. As we sat in an upscale restaurant they chose, I asked about what they had been up to since graduating from NIFT. Chitrath said he was currently working in a buying house for the brand American Eagle, where he was one of the head designers. “It’s a grungy, boho [bohemian] brand,” he told me, while pulling up images of Caucasian women wearing distressed denim shorts on his phone. He reported that he was quite happy with his income of about 45,000 rupees a month. He only complained about the distance between the factory and his home, but mentioned that he was grateful for his driver. When I commented that he was fortunate to have these privileges, he reminded me that he was an NRI and was used to, “a certain way of life” (Personal Correspondence, March 16, 2014).

To emphasize his cultural and economic capital, he explained that while there were three other NIFT graduates also working in the same buying house as him, their salaries were only about Rs. 30,000 a month. This income gap made him feel somewhat guilty: “I feel so bad—its like we had the same education, but those guys are getting much less.” (Personal Correspondence, March 16, 2014). He attributed these discrepancies to English skills and portfolios: “I even told them how to present their work during placement week, but I think they messed up the interviews,” he explained. He also shared that he was hoping to start his own new label soon. When I asked him for more details, he hinted that his business could involve making bridal wear. I joked that, “Veena Ma’am wouldn’t be too happy with his plan.” He laughed, unwilling to engage my comment.

Of the male students I came to know, Chitrath is the only one who has become a professional designer and has followed a trajectory that could be seen as commensurate with his NIFT training. However, rather than crediting the university, he suggests his family background,

⁸³ Obtaining an invite to watch a fashion show at Delhi Fashion Week is not easy for most middle-class Indians. However, for the upper-middle class and elite, scoring multiple invitations is usually just a matter of making a few phone calls or using social connections.

English speaking skills, and his NRI status determined his success. Moreover, his ability to joke about experimenting in bridal wear despite its questionable relationship to his training also reflects his class position. There is a striking overlap between Chitrath's notion of fashion and the way the "gang" understood it in the 1970s: in both, professional training in fashion is irrelevant to success in the field, especially for upper-class men to whom the industry offers the most advantages.

I turned next to Prakriti and Seema. While I remembered them as good students, to my surprise, neither was pursuing fashion-related work. While Seema explained her attendance at Fashion Week as "timepass," Prakriti responded that she was getting married soon. I hesitantly asked them whether the four years they had spent studying fashion had been worth it, given their unrelated responses. Both women explained that "doing fashion" at NIFT did not necessarily have to translate to becoming a designer. Seema elaborated: "When I got through [sic] NIFT my parents were not that happy. But I played a little for time. I told them, '*Kapde hi toh banane hain*' (all I'm doing is making clothes)...*Main toh koi bade designer thodi nah ban rahi hoon!* (I'm not really becoming a big designer or anything). Prakriti chimed in: "It doesn't matter if I get married or what I do, it's not like *mainne engineering ki course ki hain* (I've done a course in engineering).

On the most basic level, this conversation illustrates that students study fashion for many different reasons that range from actually wanting to become a designer to delaying marriage. Further, it shows how underplaying the value of the NIFT degree is an important way in which upper-middle class and elite students re-assert their privilege. Unlike most other students who would have to use their NIFT degrees to acquire jobs, certain students, like Prakriti, Chitrath, and Seema—enjoyed certain flexibility.

In unpacking these narratives, I was interested in what these assertions of class by NIFT's upper-middle class students tell us about class in South Asia. I suggest that for one, we see that the relationship between time and privilege is important across contexts. For example, similar to

Seema's use of the word "timepass," Craig Jeffrey (2010) also found that over-educated and underemployed men in Meirut employ the same word to come off as "killing time" (12) in order to accomplish something else. While in Jeffrey's ethnography "timepass" allows middle-class men to bridge caste divisions while superficially loitering, I suggest that privileged NIFT graduates similarly use the concept to assert power; Seema's notion of "timepass" is a way for her to pass time while incidentally getting a degree. In comparing these analyses, there is also an interesting gender difference that emerges, which is potentially evened out through class: we see that NIFT's middle and upper-middle class female students are able to assert their power through "timepass" in similar ways to middle-class men.

Furthermore, Seema's reduction of the designer to a tailor (*darzi*) is another way that she both expresses skepticism towards NIFT, and downplays her degree. Unlike engineering, which represents a legitimate profession for her, in describing herself as doing "nothing more than making clothes" Seema undercuts her own qualifications as a "professional" in order to come off as not fully invested in fashion. I suggest Seema's explanation is a fascinating contrast to the 1980s or early NIFT years when "just making clothes" was associated with *darzis* and was a comparison students avoided. In this case, we see that it is the logic of "just making clothes" and invoking the *darzi* that allows both Prakriti and Seema to study fashion. More broadly, this suggests that rather than a fashion education signaling class mobility and promise to students uniformly, certain students mark their privilege by de-linking their education with promise (Bill 2012; McRobbie 2002).

To compare these narratives with another relevant text, Prakriti's insistence that she was *just* "doing fashion" resonates with Mark Liechty's insights about "doing fashion" for middle-class, urban youth in Kathmandu. Liechty states:

When we understand consumer behaviors to be more about participation than possession, we begin to see how local patterns of consumerism are less about *the desire for things than about the desire for*

sociality...[my emphasis]. In this light, “doing fashion” becomes an important act in the performance of class. The word “fashion” designates those goods and images with the currency in the local middle-class cultural economy, but as fashions change, maintaining one’s place in that system becomes the real object of consumer desire [2003:257].

Liechty argues that the distinction between “doing fashion” versus simply buying goods is important for Kathmandu youth. The emphasis on the verb “doing” signifies agency within a social system, an agency crucial to performing a modern, middle-class identity. However, the way NIFT students “did” fashion is strikingly different from Liechty’s context. The figure below is of a photograph I took of a large signboard at NIFT. This was the first object students and visitors confronted when they walked into the Fashion Design Department.



This sign caught my attention several times during fieldwork, especially as I began investigating how class, caste, and gender differences that originally marked the institute and Indian fashion more generally, played out decades later. When I asked a few passing students to comment on the sign, they told me, “Being fashion is more about an identity than a profession.” Another said, “Being fashion means really being interested in fashion, not just saying I want a job in fashion...it means breathing it, thinking it, living it” (Field Notes, March 10, 2014). I came to understand the

slogan as an effort to de-professionalize the training at NIFT as simply a means to an end. In other words, “being fashion” meant embodying it, or doing something different from getting a job in the field; “really being interested” had little to do with working in the industry. On the other hand, “doing fashion” was portrayed as *the* reason why middle-class students went to NIFT: to earn money and work in an export house. Thus, if students could “be fashion” without necessarily having to “do” it, they were able to use their education for something other than its promised goals of upward mobility. In other words, they had the choice to use—or not use—their NIFT degrees. This also suggests that the needed cultural capital they had to make it in fashion in the first place was perhaps more important than the NIFT degree awarded to them.

Conclusion

The Darzi versus The Designer versus The Craftsman

In this chapter, I have made two major arguments. One is that while NIFT re-made itself as a “democratic” institute in the 1990s—and this was an important shift—the institute remains a stage upon which inequality is produced and reproduced. As I have shown, for much of the Indian middle class, the “beginnings” of Indian fashion in the 1970s and the classrooms of NIFT in 2014 are not linked by an interest in fashion, nor a pedantic methodology, but by forms of discrimination that cast certain actors as “other” to fashion. While in NIFT’s early years, the “other” was anyone but Kamal’s “gang” and its close affiliates, today, students who do not dress or commute to campus in a certain way are cast “different.” By looking at the contradictory way in which NIFT marks its development, I suggest that rather than simply dividing the elite from the non-elite, the institute has become a platform through which new systems of inequality are also produced.

Second, this chapter has also traced the emergence of the Indian fashion designer as an identity predicated on a notion of middle-class professionalism produced at NIFT. As I have shown, the professional Indian designer’s identity was imagined as opposed to, and came at the expense of,

both the *darzi* and the craftsman. These distinctions will be important for the rest of this dissertation, as they lie at the heart of the Indian fashion industry. The architects of NIFT positioned the middle-class designer “above” the *darzi*, as the latter was associated with copying designs and unoriginality, although both were associated with machine-made garments. However, this positioning also ignored some of the privileges *darzis* have enjoyed historically. For example, despite being lower caste, because of the intimacy required in their wok, *darzis* were proximate to wealthy homes and to the women and men of means they dressed.

The fashion designer’s identity was also seen as distinct from the craftsman, a distinction that was important for NIFT’s architects to gatekeep both Indian fashion and craft. While craftsmen were imagined as highly skilled and often romanticized for their artisanal skills, they lagged behind, both temporally and aesthetically. Through initiatives like the Craft Cluster program, NIFT’s worldly students “helped” craftsmen by modernizing their techniques. However, while such initiatives were meant to bring together Indian craft and ready-to-wear fashion, as I have shown, students and faculty imagined, and continue to imagine, these realms as distinct.

Therefore, although NIFT promised the middle-class Indian designers that they would be more than *darzis*, in fact, for actors like Kamal and the “gang,” Indian fashion was meant to remain pedestrian, and this separation depended on a division between ready-to-wear fashion and craft. While the opposition between *darzis* and designers was central to the NIFT project, one-of-a-kind artisanship that the elite associated with craftsmen was denied to middle-class designers. As I have shown, the sentiments, “feelings,” and passion that craft invoked in the architects of Indian fashion—and which continue to be “felt” by those who respect their legacy—were removed from the practicality with which they constructed NIFT.

As we will see in the next few chapters, the training of NIFT designers is often devalued in lieu of Indian craft, especially as “pure” textiles and handloom goods are celebrated. Moreover,

because of the authority upper and upper-middle class Indians historically enjoyed over craft, they often express skepticism towards the lucrative bridal wear market that explicitly integrates craft with ready to wear techniques to claim it as high fashion or couture. However, I will also point to a few high-end designers who appropriate craft but become exceptions for the original gatekeepers of Indian fashion. These exceptions are usually non-NIFT alumni who use craft to “tone down,” “simplify,” or “minimize” their aesthetic; in other words, they do not subscribe to the norms of commercial, middle-class fashion.

In Chapter Two, “Getting to Work,” I further explore contemporary representations of Indian fashion and the meaning of high fashion or couture in India. As I have shown in this chapter, in developing the phenomenon of “ethnic chic” and bringing craft and fashion together, NRI designers distinguished themselves from the Western ready-to-wear garments that NIFT defined as fashion. In moving from Chapter One to Chapter Two, the shift from the Mood Board to working on the garment shows what happens when students move from supposedly democratic education systems to the business of fashion. The goal of “democratization” becomes further displaced as the industry invents higher forms of fashion and marks its own progress.

“In India, everything is hand wrought and everything, down to the cheapest toy or earthen vessel is therefore, more or less a work of art.” – George Birdwood (in Mathur 2007)

“I decided to commission Neelima’s clothes to try something new, but now I’m realizing...my clients still need to see a lot of work. They need to wear it on their sleeve. The clients who buys at least.” – Priya,⁸⁴ the owner of a high-end retail store reflecting on commissioning the label IceFour* [Interview, November 1, 2013].

Chapter Two **Getting to Work: Producing Value in Indian Fashion**

This chapter is about the two most significant meanings of “work,” in the context of producing fashion India. Work can index creative practices or it can be a term that represents material labor or handcrafted embroidery. In this chapter I show how these meanings of work play out to make “work” as material labor *the* marker of high-fashion, bridal wear or couture, which constitutes at least 80% of most high end fashion designers’ annual incomes.⁸⁵ I argue that this is also a value system that maintains Indian men as the most advantageous players in the business of Indian high fashion.

In this chapter, I follow and tease out the concept of “work” in three different locations—a small designer boutique, a high-end store, and a factory that are all associated with a self-confessed “small” fashion designer, high-end couturier, and a craftsman respectively. I argue three main points: 1) in the context of producing Indian couture, material labor—in the form of certain handcrafted embroidery—is what gets counted as “work” and is more valuable than creative labor; 2) material labor can only be claimed by the Indian craftsman; i.e. not the designer or tailor and 3) within what counts as material labor, not all work is equal. The high quality work that couture clients desire creates a hierarchy between different types of embroideries.

By examining how work operates in multiple sites, I “move with” work, borrowing Saloni Mathur’s method of tracking commodities as “they travel across borders and back again” (2007:9). I

⁸⁴ Name changed.

⁸⁵ Although contested by some designers, bridal wear is often equated to couture, a term used to denote the highest form of dressmaking in fashion. This equation is unique to the Indian high-fashion industry.

show that even though there are different meanings of work, there is an agreed upon idea about what constitutes valuable work, making fashion a “collective activity” (Błaszczuk 2009) in which the designer, tailor, and craftsman engage.

Thus, unlike James Clifford, who has argued that “pure products go crazy” (1988:4) as they travel through complex global chains (Appadurai 1986; Gereffi 1994), I suggest that the “craze” of high-end Indian fashion products comes not from diluting, but re-inscribing an imagined idea of national purity and tradition through material labor. Therefore, the concept of stylistic purity that indicates the supposedly fixed and authentic relationship between objects, culture, and location is pertinent to my analysis (Clifford 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986). I suggest that although the Indian high fashion industry is part of a “network of networks” (Appadurai 1986) characterized by complex intersections between places and people that typically dilute stylistic purity, value in this context is derived from imagining traditional Indian workmanship as geographically bound and pure.

Moreover, I show how this emphasis on craftsmanship, purity and the nation-state that defines Indian high fashion maintains gender inequalities. By comparing the practices of a young female designer (excerpt one) with a middle-aged male couturier (excerpt two), I show how the “work” that high fashion demands lends itself to male authority, or female designers who can call upon their brothers or husbands to oversee production. I argue that in this way, Indian high fashion facilitates patriarchy.

In addressing the relationship between material labor or work and creative labor, I build on scholarship stemming from Maurizio Lazarrato’s (1996) idea of immaterial labor that captured a “new” productive activity in the late 1970s. Lazarrato’s argument was based on breaking down the head versus hand distinction. He observed that this distinction could no longer capture emerging practices in which “manual labor...increasingly c[a]me to involve procedures that could be called intellectual” (1996:136). Broadly arguing for a revision of the “old dichotomy between mental and

manual labor, conception and execution,” and most crucially between “labor and creativity,” this concept was later developed by Autonomous Marxists. Taking Lazarrato’s preliminary definition of immaterial labor as the “cultural and informational context involved in the production of a commodity” (1996:133), these scholars developed the term to account for the lack of attention to gender, and the failure to recognize the ongoing exploitation embedded within it (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). Thus, Hardt and Negri’s definition of creative or immaterial labor as “labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication” (2000:290) became more accepted. This definition of immaterial labor also shapes my understanding of the term; I show how the creative labor of male and female designers is unequal, and this inequality is exacerbated by class and caste differences.

Immaterial Labor and Creativity

The concept of immaterial labor is significant for scholars exploring creative industries like advertising, architecture, and design (Caves 2002; Featherstone 1991). Richard Florida, for example, argued that “creativity was becoming the key factor in our economy and society,” changing the lives of more than 38 million Americans who formed a “new norm setting creative class” (2012:10). Supporting this view, Alvin Toffler claimed that with the rise of immaterial labor and creativity, “traditional labor has become less important in the new information society and the new hero is the innovator, who combines imaginative knowledge with action” (1991:221).

The argument that creative laborers should be hailed as modern entrepreneurs (Reich 2000) created a parallel discourse. Scholars argued that creativity was in fact the grounds for a new kind of exploitation (Bourdieu 1999; Gill 2002; McRobbie 2002; Neff 2005; Ross 2004). They suggested that professionals with the contradictory freedom of flexible work hours and high prestige jobs with very low pay experienced a “collapse of boundaries between work and play” (Neff et al. 2005). Instead,

creativity was attributed to the creation of a “precarious worker” who belonged to a “precarious generation” (Ross 2009:6) disproportionately affected by risk and anxiety (Gill and Pratt 2009).⁸⁶

Considering the growing scholarship on fashion industries, Christina Moon argued that while creative labor is normally associated with the fashion designer or “people with mythical like qualities” (Florida 2012), all fashion production practices—including “back end work that may look like mundane labor practices” (1996:130)—involve creativity. Following Lazaratto in showing how “material labor never exists without immaterial labor for any fashion worker” (1996:120), Moon calls for a re-examination of the hierarchies assumed in fashion production that have historically privileged the designer’s work above any other.

While my findings build on Moon’s call to engage with creativity as “a shifting ideology with constantly changing meanings in fashion” (2012: 32), in this chapter I question the universal value creativity is presumed to hold, and the general assumption across this literature that all workers desire to be characterized by it. For example, Moon suggests that the possibility of creative labor is what counters the “impersonal forces of economics that often characterize the industry” (2012:19). For Florida, similarly, “creativity is the ability to create meaningful work, and is the decisive source of competitive advantage in a post industrial economy” (2012:14). Thus, despite their disagreements, both Moon and Florida argue that creative labor is a more highly valued form of labor. For both, creativity brings value to a commodity or to the lives of creative producers, including fashion designers.

I argue that the context of Indian couture offers an opportunity to turn these assumptions on their head. First, I show how material labor or “work” is more valuable than creative labor in this context. This is reflected in a conversation with Nonita Kalra—former editor of *Elle* magazine—who told me: “When designers reach a certain level, they like to call themselves craftsmen”

⁸⁶ See Chapter Five for a continued discussion of this literature.

(Personal Communication, November 1, 2013). I suggest this “certain level” that Kalra is referring to is the desire for successful designers to actually break away from their roles as creative producers to assert themselves as producers of material labor, and therefore place themselves higher in the value chain.⁸⁷ Interestingly, in order to do this, they borrow the label of Indian craftsmen that traditionally represented the antithesis to creative labor. I suggest these findings offer important insights to those who theorize creativity as the source of a new form of exploitation in the “no collar” workplace (Ross 2004). They suggest that not only should we disrupt the assumption of value that creativity holds, but that we should also examine how the label of a designer demands its minimization.

Moreover, within the category of material labor, there is a specific kind of “work” that is more closely linked to the stylistic purity (Clifford 1988) that marks couture. Tereza Kuldova’s dissertation *Indian Fashion and Spectacular Capitalism* (2013) explores the production of contemporary Indian aesthetics and explains the success of the “royal chic look.” Kuldova shows how the contemporary Indian luxury market depends on a specific kind of “work” or embroidery that invokes the craft of the Mughal period to gain value. This makes the embroideries of *zardozi*,⁸⁸ *zari*, and *chikan*⁸⁹ that were historically associated with this period *the* most significant markers of valuable work.⁹⁰ Sumati Nagrath has explained that these garments allow Indians to self-orientalize and imagine their own traditions as exotic (Nagrath 2003).

⁸⁷ See introduction for a discussion on how the current trends in Indian fashion represent a return to an imagined artisanal or crafts-based past. As I elaborate in Chapter One, this discourse invokes the elite’s historical preference for the handmade garment versus machine-made, mass-produced fashion.

⁸⁸ *Zardozi* represents the finest of embroidery that is executed via pure gold thread. It is the most labor-intensive form of embroidery. It traditionally comes from Iran and was widely used during the Mughal Period.

Zari refers to an even thread made of gold or silver that is often used in *zardozi* embroidery. However, today most *zari* is not made of real gold and silver, but has cotton or polyester yarn at its core, wrapped by golden/silver metallic yarn. This is called “tested *zari*.”

⁸⁹ *Chikan* is believed to have been introduced by Nur Jehan, Mughal emperor Jahangir’s wife. It is one of Lucknow’s most famous textile decoration styles. As Kuldova writes, “For any luxury connoisseur, *chikan* embroidery evokes the indulgent worlds of the Nawabi rulers of Awadh, synonymous with cultural refinement. (“In Press:”n.d)

⁹⁰ I would like to note that while these embroideries are associated with Muslim craftsmen, clients value this “work” because of the high skill it requires, not the religion of the producer who is associated with it.

The first image below features a garment that is a classic examples of the “royal chic look.” While this neo-feudal aesthetic gave birth to ornate and decadent fashion shows invoking a blue-blooded India,⁹¹ the images that follow show how this phenomenon has extended itself well beyond Indian couture. Given all these representations, it is safe to say that the “royal chic” look has become the defining aesthetic of the Indian luxury market:



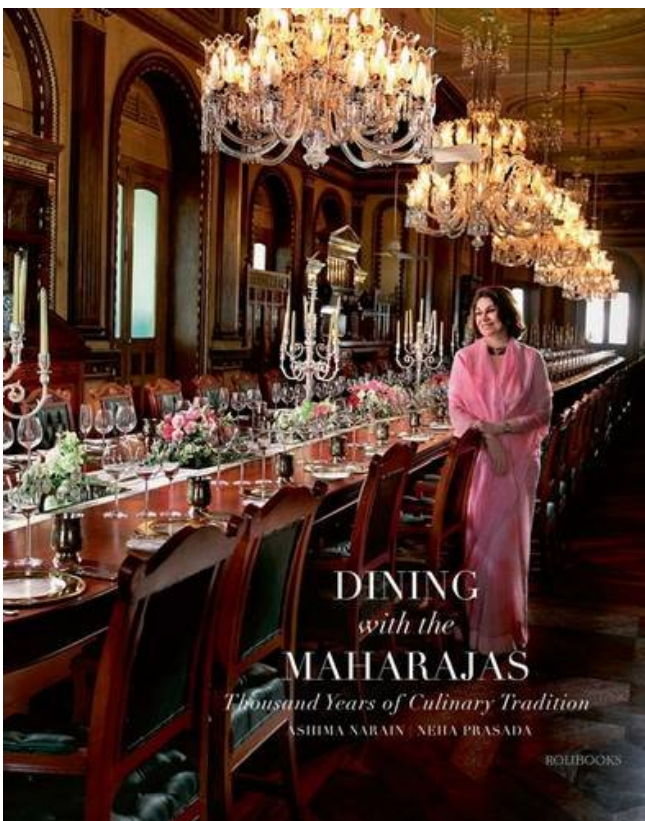
This image is from Sabyasachi Mukherjee’s Autumn/Festive season 2012 titled “The Modern Maharani.” Sabyasachi is currently India’s highest retailing designer in the industry. He usually claims the Grand Finale slot—the most coveted time to exhibit—at Fashion Week if he chooses to show. Last year, his company hit the 100-crore mark⁹² (Miss Malini 2013)

⁹¹ Couturier JJ Valaya’s elaborate sets are the best example of this.

⁹² Sabyasachi is considered to be the most profitable designer in the industry. Other successful couturieres estimated their annual turnovers to be around 30 to 40 crores.



The Taj Hotel Group advertising is a good example of the “royal chic” phenomenon. (Marigold Events 2015)



The celebrated coffee table book *Dining with the Maharajas* was based on adapting Mughal recipes to the modern palette (Amazon Books 2012).

However, while Kuldova’s argument refers to the contemporary aesthetic of Indian couture, I found that the emphasis on “work” is far from new. For example, in an informal discussion, Sal Tahilani—wife and business partner of India’s leading couturier Tarun Tahilani—said:

In the 1990s, when we first opened up shop, people would come into Ensemble⁹³ and say, “I can make this garment myself” if they saw even a perfectly stitched tunic. The garments had to have more *work* [my emphasis] for them to buy it. People still ask, “What is Indian about this piece?” if it’s not obvious. They keep looking for the embroidery. [Personal Communication, November 4, 2013]

In Sal’s narrative, we see that the demand for “work”—or hand-crafted embroidery—for Indian clothes has been prominent for a decade and a half. As Sujata Assmoull, launch editor of *Harper’s Bazaar*, concurred, “This need for Indian work and embroidery became more important when all the global brands started coming in to the market” (Personal Communication, December 9, 2013). This demand also had an important impact on the NIFT syllabus; roughly five years after the institute opened, a Craft Cluster program and Surface Techniques course was added in order to meet this consumer demand.

I found considerable debate surrounding the question of why Indians began to value “work.” While some critics of Indian fashion suggest that “work” allowed Indians to create an individual aesthetic economy separate from the West, more skeptical actors suggest that “work” became valued because Indians could not master Western *pret*, or ready-to-wear fashion. While I did not find enough evidence to support either argument, it was clear that the demand for “work” did something familiar in the history of the Indian visual arts: it once again called upon the figure of the Indian craftsman to produce and symbolize its imagined authenticity.

A decade later, legitimizing the value of Indian couture depended upon playing up the “work” of Indian craftsmen through increasing embellishments on garments. In this sense, the

⁹³ See introduction for reference to Ensemble.

Indian couture industry became part of what Saloni Mathur calls the “cult of the craftsman,” an aesthetic mission which the British established in 1905 to appropriate the apparently “timeless” craft of India, and maintain it unchanged (Mathur 2007). As Mathur explains, *swadeshi* nationalists repeated this strategy decades later, loosely imagining their craft products as inspired by an authentic, Indian artisanal past. However, unlike these movements that appropriated the Indian craftsman, I argue that by the turn of the millennium, the couture industry was similarly embedded in this “cult,” but took credit for making Indian craft luxurious. Through this “new” industry, craft could be presented as clean, sanitized and unpolluted.

However, while handcrafted embroidery is what clients equate to the “value added aspect” of couture, the craftsmen who produce it do not experience the benefits of this system in the ways they would like.⁹⁴ While they continue to be highly sought after by high-end designers and their clients, aside from other disadvantages, the demand on them for what they describe as the “same kind of work” (Excerpt Three), also induces a sense of jadedness.

Excerpt One: No Value for Creative Labor
Neelima’s Studio

Neelima Khanna*⁹⁵ first struck me as a sprightly, young designer. She worked under a label I call *Ice Four*. Back The first time I interviewed her was in August 2012, when I found my way to her modest studio, or what she described as the “boutique of a small designer.” Nailed to the wall one floor below her workspace, I saw a board with the words *Western Wear* written out, which directed shoppers to the London-educated designer’s hip boutique. I took a photograph of the sign at that time, not so much because of the content, but because I appreciated its material form. The chunky

⁹⁴ Here, I would also like to foreground Mira Mohsini’s (2010) important reminder that while Indian fashion places great emphasis on highly-skilled Muslim “work,” the livelihoods of craftsmen who produce it have only become more precarious over time; while Muslim arts are celebrated by wealthy, urban citizens through mediums like Indian couture or Sufi music, its main patrons—North Indian Hindu clients—continue to fetishize the community, thereby reproducing their power.

⁹⁵ Name changed.

nails neatly hammered to spell the brand name suggested that designer had a very firm idea about what she set out to do.

I visited Neelima again in early October of 2013, more than a year after beginning fieldwork. She invited me over to her store for a cup of coffee. It had been many months since we had met. However, I could quickly tell that she was less well than usual. She reported that she'd suffered a long period of illness and had been diagnosed with low blood pressure. I also learned that she was helping her sister set up her own leather accessory line.⁹⁶ Making our way to her studio, I was taken aback by what had become a very dilapidated sign that no longer held its original place, but lay on the floor outside her empty studio with the words *Western Wear*, blackened out. Anyone looking closely could see that a marker had been used to black out each letter so carefully that the sign no longer had a trace of the word "Western."

As Neelima and I began talking, I learned that beyond a general feeling of lethargy, she was questioning her decision to be a designer in India. She wondered aloud whether she should continue to sell in the domestic market, and whether fashion was a career that even interested her any longer. Within her reasoning, she used the word *work* often. In the excerpt below, we see how she invokes it differently:

I'm just not being able to *work* the market here. Fine, I have my stuff at Bombay Electric⁹⁷ that is one awesome store, but other than that, look at what's happened to the market here. NO ONE who has any taste. Look around you, look at the clientele. There are marble shops here! Replacing Independent bookstores. How am I going to be able to *work it* here? Should I also start making heavy, heavy *lenghas* with all that *zardozi* work?⁹⁸ I think that's the only way to survive here. I feel like *I can't actually be creative*. Even if I do something a bit different, it *still has to be Indian*, it still has to have this craft-craft *work*, which I can do, but that's not really me! Seriously, the only big order I got last month was from

⁹⁶ The importance of family businesses in the industry is discussed further in Chapter Three.

⁹⁷ Bombay Electric is a high-end, luxury fashion store in Mumbai. It is known for its eclectic, global designer selection rather than traditional Indian wedding wear.

⁹⁸ Reference to bridal wear

a Korean client. Most clients always want the same stuff, the Indian wear, kind of expensive looking stuff. [Field Notes, September 8, 2013]

While I tried to console Neelima, I found it difficult because I had heard some version of the statement “Indian is the only thing that works in India” several times. While Neelima and I had previously agreed that this was a broad generalization, I found her now mimicking the reductive language she often complained about.

This moment marked a clear shift in my analysis. Through my fieldwork, whenever I would cite Neelima as an example of someone successfully producing “Western” wear or expanding the definition of what “works” in India as an exception to designers, they would make comments that would appreciate but undercut her efforts. It was always their advice, which they expected me to deliver anonymously, that she stop doing Western wear, and “realize” that “Indian wear equals success” (Personal Correspondence, October 10th, 2013).⁹⁹ However, Neelima was quite aware of this general perception and even more determined to continue in her production of Western garments because of it. She equated this decision with “sticking to her guns.”

Neelima’s lack of economic success when I first met her contradicted her growing celebration as a conceptual, avant-garde, minimal, and toned down designer; all these words were used to describe her when she applied for the Vogue Fashion Fund Award competition in 2013. Making sense of her defeat that year, Neelima explained: “I was very hyped-up but clearly not what the judges were ready for. I think they just needed some cool fish in the pond, just to add some edge” (Personal Communication, September 8, 2013). Further explaining the competition, she went on to make a link between being conceptual or “edgy,” Western, and androgynous as opposed to producing *work* that *works the market*.

⁹⁹ This “advice” was collectively presented by a group of designers whom I spoke with after Neelima’s fashion show.

Neelima's use of the word "edgy" is similar to the way in which Sherry Ortner's (2013) informants use the word when talking about independent film. For Ortner's informants, "edgy" describes something that may be dysfunctional and often morally ambiguous, but at the same time alternative. I suggest that for Neelima too, her self-identification as a "cool fish in the pond" makes "edginess" across these contexts a position that represents being simultaneously at the limit of, but still within, the market space. In Indian fashion, as with independent film, this position often comes at the cost of profitability in representing the "edge" of acceptability.

The Meaning of Craft

In responses to Neelima's collection, there seemed to be no doubt among designers about what producing Indian wear and focusing on the "domestic market" meant. All designers seemed to know that garments that *worked* relied on a certain kind of work. However, Neelima actively resisted this system; her vision pushed clients to think about minimally worked upon Western wear as luxurious, while maintaining the idea of luxury as antithetical to mass-production. Thus, while she positioned herself as a Western ready-to-wear designer, she also distinguished herself from NIFT-trained designers through her attempt to bring exclusive craftsmanship—which many of her clients associated with high-end Indian wear—to Western clothing. This was challenging; I knew many of her clients perceived her brand to be "higher" than a mass-retail brand like Levis, but often made comparisons between her work and slightly more upscale, mass retail stores like Zara. Needless to say, these comparisons were frustrating for Neelima.

Moreover, while Neelima presented the choices between making bridal wear or making "craft-craft" as separate, many designers would disagree. For example, in an interview with David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore, who jointly form the Parisian endorsed brand *Abraham&Thakore*, David Abraham stated: "We've always been interested in Indian craft and textile...that is our USP...and people are somewhat surprised by our ability to do bridal wear and still be very A&T."

But like everyone else, we also had to go that way” (Personal Communication, September 10, 2013). Following our interview, the duo showed me their *Angoori Bridal 2013 Collection*, a beautiful series of jackets they told me were inspired by the “unsentimental bride who had not been waiting her whole life to be married.”



An image from David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore’s *Bridal Redux Collection*. This is the first high-fashion “bridal” collection to feature pants and jackets for Indian brides (The Post 2013)

While *Abraham and Thakore* represent the extent to which bridal wear can be experimented with through their creation of “untraditional” garments, we see that “having to go that way,” for designers represents something very specific. In this case, Abraham alludes to the inevitable link between bridal wear and profitability—a relationship that depends on showcasing Indian handcrafted work. However, bridal wear that is “very A&T,” and for some a paradox, must still represent curated craft. For instance, the use of *zari* on the untraditional bridal trousers still provides the material “work” clients are looking for,¹⁰⁰ but allows A&T to provide their signature, Parisian,

¹⁰⁰ Abraham and Thakore are known to work with less valuable embroideries and craft technique like *ikat* as well. However, I am making the case that their work qualifies more easily as high fashion (as opposed to Neelima’s early work) because of their explicit use of, and public support for, Indian craft.

non-traditional touch.¹⁰¹ Moreover, and most importantly, their work celebrates the Indian craftsman and thus continues to enjoy support from the Indian elite, including Kamal and his “gang.”¹⁰²

In a subsequent interview in May of 2014, David told me that this collection was the extent to which the brand could “go bridal,” though he joked about how “the thought of putting 1,000 *swarovskis*¹⁰³ on a lengha” did cross his mind. In other words, to showcase handcrafted “work” in another way, and to a much greater extent, would be to take away from the brand identity of A&T. For David, the temptation to use and overuse “work” to make a quick buck was both immoral and possible. However, resisting this was key in maintaining his position as an old-school, elite producer with cultural capital.

Abraham’s insight is important to examine Neelima’s position. I suggest that for Neelima, the failure of “work” lies not only in her decision to use craft or not, but also questions *how* she uses it. While her garments are produced in India and already involve elements of Indian craft, in the early part of her career, she did not present this “work” above or equal to her own creative desires. Moreover, unlike *Abraham and Thakore*, who are marked as old-school, elite producers (and therefore, have a license to dabble in, and even joke about the lucrative aspects of couture), if Neelima turned to bridal wear, most industry actors wouldn't consider this ironic.

Not all work is equal

For Neelima’s Spring and Summer 2013 collection, she developed a geometrical, block-print template that consisted of multiple sharp-edged triangles. This motif is atypical and at variance with the clichéd patterns of flowers or animals that usually appear on block-printed textiles, and were pre-

¹⁰¹ While A&T’s bridal collection was considered good enough to meet the somewhat subjective standards of what counts as Indian couture, most clients still would not consider them bridal wear designers. Instead, they are often celebrated for other projects they take on, which are perceived as more serious. For example, Vana Retreats, a super-luxurious health hotel that costs approximately 800 USD a night, commissioned the duo to design the textile-based staff uniforms and furniture.

¹⁰² See Chapter One.

¹⁰³ Short hand for any type of crystals or diamond encrusted embroidery.

“conventionalized” as “Indian” by the British (Mathur 2007:35). Neelima’s development of this signature print, which she described as “contemporary” and “not so Indian” took a lot of work. She travelled to a small village outside of Jaipur multiple times to develop the template. However, because of its uniqueness, this labor remains less rewarded by the market. Moreover, because Neelima’s clothes are fairly expensive,¹⁰⁴ especially by the standards of a “small designer,” block printing, especially in this somewhat unrecognizable form of geometrical images, is seen as the kind of “work” that is mismatched to its corresponding price tag. This is expressed in retailer Priya’s anxiety that Neelima’s garments do not “show” the work that her Indian clients want to see.¹⁰⁵

In contrast to “heavy work,” which traditionally marks Indian couture, Neelima’s aesthetic is seen as a product of creative labor, or what “may not really look like work” (Lazaratto 1996:130). I suggest that her mechanical repetition of the word “craft-craft,” though perhaps indicative of her comfort with Hindi semantic patterns, is an interesting way in which she reveals her judgment of dominant market tastes. The repetition suggests how for her, making couture-worthy, valuable Indian garments can ironically have the feeling of mass production normally linked with ready-to-wear Western designers.

Furthermore, I argue that embedded in the idea that Neelima is not actually using “craft” or creating “Indian work” lies the assumption that there is an imbalance between her own labor and that of her craftsmen; one may assume there is more creativity than “work.” This is also tied to the “problem” that Neelima’s work is not typically marked as ethical; as opposed to buying a hand-woven product or a heavily embroidered garment, there is less opportunity for clients to claim they are “saving” Indian craft by buying her brand.¹⁰⁶ Thus, given my findings in Chapter One, it is not surprising that *Ice Four* was not a brand the established Indian elite immediately favored. As I will

¹⁰⁴ A cotton, block-printed dress at *Ice Four** retails at approximately \$300.

¹⁰⁵ See introductory quote at the beginning of this chapter.

¹⁰⁶ As we will see in Excerpt Two, this is another necessary mark of Indian high fashion. However, the link between ethics and high fashion is ironic given that couturier’s work practices are more likely to exploit the craftsman’s labor.

show, her eventual popularity depended on evolving her aesthetic, a move that involved using more craft.

Further, I suggest that Neelima’s self-identification as a “small designer,” which refers to both her profit margins and the number of craftsmen she is able to employ, is not unrelated to her being a young, Hindu woman.¹⁰⁷ As she often told me—and as I could confirm through my observations—asserting authority over a group of craftsmen is considerably easier for male designers, and even easier for male designers who are part of a family business.¹⁰⁸ However, for Neelima, to resist both expanding her business, which would typically require hiring men from her family as managers, *and* continue to make garments that did not count as “worked upon,” living out the industry inequalities seemed fated.

Excerpt Two: Bridal Wear, The “Good Work,” and the Craftsman’s “Stylistic Purity”

*I am at New Delhi’s luxurious Emporio Mall shadowing a trio of Bania women—a mother and her two daughters—who represent the main clients of the bridal market. They have an appointment with Tarun Singh*¹⁰⁹ later in the afternoon and I have the privilege of spending time with them under the guise of being a part of his staff. Aside from making small chat with them through many hours, this also involves short coffee breaks, instructing their driver where to park, and giving him permission to go for lunch while the three ladies pick up everything ranging from high-end clothing, shoes, bags, and gifts for the future son-in-law’s family. Among these gifts is a pair of Gucci shoes for a two year-old nephew. I notice the price tag: Rs.11,000 (approximately USD 183).*

It is the second or third time they tell me they’ve gone “on a hunt,” a phrase that I understood signaled their extensive efforts in preparing for the complex wedding arrangements that followed. The mother, whom I will call Bina, is an affectionate forty-something-year-old lady who is gregarious from the moment she steps out of the backseat of a Lexus SUV. Her eldest daughter, Maya, is the bride to be. Bina’s youngest daughter, Layla, I quickly learn has*

¹⁰⁷ Neelima was twenty-five when I met her.

¹⁰⁸ In light of this, it is perhaps not a coincidence that only one or two female designers are amongst India’s top bridal couturiers or the most profitable producers in the market.

¹⁰⁹ Name changed

a reputation for being fairly high-maintenance, and is constantly reminded by her mother to not “steal Maya’s thunder.”

Bina shares that she has planned five “functions” for her daughter’s wedding. There will be a “youngsters,” mehendi, sangeet, wedding, and reception” she excitedly tells me. The “youngsters,” which has become an established word in Delhi wedding-going vernacular, signifies a party for the bride and groom’s friends and cousins, and also as Bina jokes, “includes all the cool aunties.” This is the occasion that is typically the most casual, allowing everyone (including the bride) to drink alcohol and have a good time. The other occasions I learn, are considered more serious and sartorially demand a much larger budget. In other words, the more serious the function, the “heavier” the clothes need to be; in designer terms, this means the more “work” they need to have, the more ornate they should look, and the more decorative they should appear.

The bride and her family must find suitable outfits for each member and each occasion, a chore or a pleasure—depending on whom you ask—that can take up to six or eight months. For this reason, Tarun Singh is one of the three designers they will check out today, but one of about eight they will eventually visit. Bina and her daughters consider Tarun to be a fairly typical high-end designer who can provide them with some “luxurious” clothing. They are well aware that his signature is the “drape,” a complex technique of layering cloth that marks all his “Indian” garments. On the way to Tarun’s store, Bina tells me that she knows Tarun to have very “good work,” “good finish” and also to be a “very nice person.”

Tarun warned me that the ladies were likely to have a great amount of spending power. “They’ll want Maya to look and feel like a princess,” he guessed. This statement was like many of his, delivered with some sarcasm. He predicted that all the ladies would buy an outfit from him. He explained that it was now “common” for rich families to buy from a single designer, in order to represent their own name as a unified brand.

As the ladies shopped, I observed that the process of finding the ladies “exactly what they want” is ironically very specialized and something that Tarun does repeatedly. What struck me most during this visit and multiple others was the very specific meaning of “work” that was collaboratively valued and produced.

[Fieldnotes, October 1, 2013]

For high-end clients like Bina and her daughters, the value of couture is primarily derived from what they perceive to be “good work.” Therefore, for designers and their staff, pleasing the high-end client involves presenting a garment that indicates a careful negotiation between creative and material labor, designer, and craftsman.

This emphasis on material labor as a determinant of “good work” has an important history in India. For example, Saloni Mathur’s (2007) rich account shows us what “good work” meant for Arthur Liberty, the founder of the export warehouse Liberty Stores in 1875. For him, doing “good work” and the “right thing” was “to conserve the art of the Eastern world” through the “re-salvaging” of Indian crafts and textiles (35).¹¹⁰ In the next section, I unpack how this strikingly similar language of “good work” manifests almost a century and a half later in the context of Indian couture.



An image of New Delhi’s luxurious, Emporio Mall where Tarun has his bridal boutique. The cost of renting his 1200 sq. ft. space for a month is approximately 11 lakhs or 20,000 USD. (Fashion Scandal 2015)

¹¹⁰ The language of “doing the right thing” was similarly used in a NIFT classroom lecture to enforce a sense of morality upon fashion students. See Chapter One.

Work versus Fit

When I observed Bina making decisions about what constituted “good work, she would usually turn the cloth over and show me how it displayed what she considered a well-managed relationship between material and creative labor, which stood for craftsman and designer respectively. This relationship manifested itself in two distinct but interrelated aspects which she and other clients often pointed out: work and fit. I suggest that the way in which these were thought to play out indexed not only the divide between material and creative labor, designer and craftsman, but also pointed to a hierarchy that clients like Bina wanted to imagine.

The first aspect of a garment, “work,” is considered the most important, while it is also imagined as given, fixed, and unalterable. Its value stems from how clients imagine the craftsmen who produce it. Fit, on the other hand, which refers to how the garments look on the clients body, is, according to Bina, “always something the designers can fix.” From Bina’s initial judgments, I wondered why she was shopping at Emporio, given her overwhelming emphasis on “work” over fit or design. When I hesitantly asked her, Bina responded that going directly to a craftsman or a lower-end store for “work” was not an option; she explained: “Couture designers still offer something original.” I will go on to suggest that the “something original” she refers to is the designer’s ability to curate, “customize,” and essentially, own a craftsman’s work.¹¹¹

Moreover, in both the designer and client imagination “fit” is a Western trait that is associated with stitched rather than draped clothes.¹¹² Couturiers are ideally expected to have mastered both aspects, regardless of what kinds of clothes they made, and many perceived less successful designers as incapable of mastering fit. For example, Ashish Soni, the first Indian designer

¹¹¹ See the section titled *Bespoke Wear*. Bina’s statement also shows that the success of a couturier largely depends on his ability to hire craftsmen on an exclusive basis. This helps bridal wear designer’s trademark traditional embroideries and present them as their personal creations.

¹¹² To emphasize this point, it is interesting that at NIFT, students are not allowed to submit *saris* as finished garments for class assignments. *Saris* are considered to show nothing about fit or stitching, even though wearing one requires a stitched petticoat and blouse.

to have shown at New York Fashion Week, elaborated: “Fit is *the* reason why Indian designers can’t break into New York or Paris” (Personal Communication, December 3, 2013). Others who echoed Soni’s idea that an inability to master fit produces misfits suggested I think about the emphasis on “work” as a way Indian designers conceal their poor technical skills. Once again, these statements implied that NIFT’s central mission of teaching Indian designers how to produce stitched garments had failed.

As Emma Tarlo has shown, existing binaries that organize garments into stitched versus draped clothing, or Western versus Indian, have a long and important history. For example, Tarlo discusses how the British-identified “problem of what Indians should wear,” (1996:28) was largely a mission to rid the Hindu population who were associated with the drape—as opposed to Muslims who were associated with the stitched—of their “uncut, unstitched cloth” which did not already constitute “clothing” (1996:29). In the nationalist period, this was seen as part of a larger conspiracy to make Hindus dependent on British-manufactured Indian clothing. Given the continuing relevance of this historical framework, I suggest that the contemporary emphasis on “work” has the effect of unsettling this binary; I suggest that “work” is seen to trump the problem of fit in a way that the drape historically could not. Thus, embedded in the view that “India no longer needs to look to the West,” which some designers told me when I began fieldwork,¹¹³ was the perception that designers no longer needed to master the Western-derived stitched garment. Moreover, a simple comparison between Neelima (Excerpt One) and Tarun (Excerpt Two) reveals that the well-stitched clothing that *Ice Four* is known for is what makes it less valuable than the draped, worked-on clothing that Tarun’s couture represents.

However, as Bina pointed out, “work” that shows the craftsman’s labor still requires what is seen as the designer’s creative labor to curate or “finish.” When clients showed me “good work,” I

¹¹³ A quote by Gautam Rakha; see introduction.

was often urged to look at the evidence of embroidery—usually in the form of *zardozi*—as “work” that was pure, heavy, and *bariq* (refined). I was especially encouraged to examine the intricacies by which peacocks, flowers, and other animals were embroidered in pure gold thread, and challenged to count the number of stitches in each motif. When Bina examined Tarun’s “work,” her admiration of the drape that she knew he was “known for,” was ironically secondary to the intricate embroidery on the fabric. Therefore, Tarun’s “good finish” indicated his ability to “touch up” or foreground his craftsman’s work. This process often involved the designer making demands on craftsmen to neaten up the embroidery in order to further refine it.

Moreover, for Bina, the garment’s “heaviness” was both a priority and an aesthetic judgment that translated to economics and emotions; for a worthy bride like her daughter, the garment’s weight had to reflect what had been put “in” to her making. Maya’s *lengha* was meant to embody the monetary and symbolic investments her family had made over time. All these investments were perceived as accumulated and reflected in the heaviness of wedding couture.

However, while the tactile metaphors of a craftsman’s “hand” versus the designer’s “touch” point to how much labor each puts in to a garment, this relationship is inverted when the physical distance between producer and client is considered. With the exception of a few Masterjis, craftsmen and tailors rarely come into close physical contact with clients. In contrast, designers are expected to perform intimate acts like adjusting bra cups, hemming petticoats, and tucking in seams. This makes the luxurious ladies dressing rooms in malls like Emporio exceptional spaces where women roam freely without thinking too much about modesty. This sense of freedom is further played on by the mood in luxurious boutiques: dreamy music often plays in the background, the sounds from gently gurgling fountains and swiping credit cards mix, and heavy curtains segregate the trial rooms that couturieres often enter without permission.

Nevertheless, despite the physical proximity and intimacy clients share with designers, “good work,” which is linked with craftsmen, is valued most. Judgments of bad work by contrast—glossed by judgments that deem garments “over the top”¹¹⁴—indicate an imbalance of material and creative labor, and also suspect that the designer has done some violence to the material labor of the craftsman by displaying too much embroidery. I suggest that when a designer is perceived to go “over the top,” there is discomfort with the amount of labor being exploited for commercial gains. This also implies something about the designer’s ethics and taste; this is why the phrase “over the top” is commonly employed by the old moneyed elite to talk about other designers who also use craft, but in their perceptions, to unethical extents. For example, David Abraham’s decision not to put “1000 swarovskis on a lengha” was in part curbed by his perceived division between curating craft and being “over the top.”

However, exploitation was something consumers were also susceptible to. For example, creating “good finish” was not always what clients would perhaps imagine as an authentic process, or what they may define as ethical. When I observed designers completing “finishing touches” on Indian garments, I often noticed them removing a few seams or creating minor imperfections to perform a method they called “raising the embroidery.” This process made clear that the embroidery being displayed was hand and not machine-executed. The particular verb “to raise” also had the implication of elevating the material labor above any other conceptual or creative labor.¹¹⁵ This kind of practice signaled the designer’s awareness about the value of his own labor versus that of his craftsman.

¹¹⁴ See discussion in “The Designer’s Dilemma,” Chapter Four.

¹¹⁵ I would also add that the particular demand for Indian “work” as material labor performed by craftsmen is in no way limited to an Indian audience or garments. In an interview with Rahul Leekha-- the head designer for an export house that sources to high-end lifestyle store *Crate&Barrel* -- he stated: “Sometimes my clients come back to me asking me to make my stitches more crooked, more obviously made by some craftsperson in India.... So I go back and tell my guys, *Bhaiya is ko thoda tera bana do...* (Guys, make this a little crooked)” (Personal Correspondence, November 25, 2013).

The different weights of heaviness

During the process of examining a garment, high-end customers like Bina would determine whether the garment was “heavy” or “fine enough.” This depended on both the amount and type of material work the garment displayed.¹¹⁶ Most often, “heavy” garments required the evidence of traditional *zardozi* or *zari* work. *Chikan* work was also considered relatively “heavy.” *Phulkari* work from Punjab was acceptable, but was considered more “elegant” than heavy, and thus reserved for “Indian” wear but not couture garments. *Gota Patti* from Rajasthan also count as “work” and was often found on bridal wear sold in lower-end stores, but was minimally used by high-end bridal wear designers.

The demand for work became even more evident as I learned that store assistants and designers were more than used to being asked the question: *yeh kis ka kaam hain?* (who’s work is this?) and “can I have some more work on my garment?” consistently. This first question, despite its literal translation, would always be interpreted as “what *kind* of work is this?” I observed that the answer was never the name of a craftsman, but rather, the specific region or technique used. “This is Kashmiri work,” or “this is Pakistani work,” were quite typically satisfactory answers. However, while these responses were likely to signal high-quality work to a client, the region or religion of the producer did not determine value alone.

¹¹⁶ For example, this value system does not value block printing very highly.

Types of Work:



1. Zardozi work (Exotic India 2015)



2. Close-up of *Gota Pati* work (Jaipur Blog 2015)

Moreover, I observed that the demand for more of a specific kind of work was mostly of concern to North Indian, Hindu clients who predominantly buy Indian couture. For them, the value of a garment depended on being able to see, touch, and feel what was considered “stylistically pure” work (Clifford 1988); this was usually the intricate, high quality embroidery of *zari* and *zardozi* historically associated with Muslim craftsmen. These demands were often reinforced by referrals to popular Bollywood films. For example, I heard many clients refer to actress Aishwariya Rai’s lengha

in the film *Jodha Akbar* as a highly desirable “statement piece” that they were keen to own a version of. The image below—taken from a popular fashion website—features one of India’s top supermodels wearing the piece. The blogger credits “top fashion designer and stylist Neeta Lulla”¹¹⁷ for designing this “historical” piece that she declares has lost no value even though “it has been so many years since the film released” (“Bridal Outfits,” 2015). As we see, the blue and pink *lehnga* is filled with embellishments, all of which the designer claims to be hand-embroidered.



(Bridal Outfits 2015)

Requests for “more work” and added “heaviness” were well anticipated by designers. After a few visits to Emporio mall, I realized that store plans in high designer boutiques reflect a structure in which clients have to *work towards more work*, and thus, more value. Walking in to any high designer

¹¹⁷ See Chapter Four for more on Neeta Lulla.

store, clients normally first confront the most affordable, Western or ready-to-wear racks. This section then opens up into another space—and sometimes, another room—that marks the beginning of Indian wear, naturally filtering out clients with smaller budgets. Clients usually see the bridal or couture wear section last, and this ideally represents the best of the designer’s work or the most traditional part of his collection. This architectural plan mirrors what most high-end clients would describe as a process by which they are led from the lightest and least work to the heaviest, and best. In order to sell this part of the boutique as super-exclusive, many designers allowed clients in by appointment only.



An image from the “heaviest” or couture section of a high-end store (Fashion Trends 2015).

Making Bespoke

Indian couture demands the production of bespoke garments. This term, both fairly new to Indian fashion and already common vocabulary, means customizing, or making one-of-a-kind pieces. At the turn of the millennium, many mid-level designers who wanted to become high-end couturieres named their workplaces bespoke studios. Moreover, to justify their astronomical prices, designers often presented their studios as akin to the “imperial workshops” of the Mughal era that could “turn out any masterpieces” (Cohn 1996:325) or one of a kind, tailor-made clothing. This re-

naming invoked nostalgia for an image of hundreds of (male) craftsmen working laboriously to produce goods for their royal patrons. For many high-end customers like Singh's clients who wanted to imagine themselves as modern-day royalty, this fantasy hit the right chord (Kuldova; n.d).

Designers who are able to successfully sell their products as highly-exclusive bespoke wear see themselves as staking a claim in a bride's wedding trousseau. Rather than reducing the act of selling a wedding *lengha* to a one-time transaction, they re-imagine this as marking a life-long relationship between family and high-end couturier; a few years ago, this idea earned enough value to become the premise of a popular reality television show.¹¹⁸ In 2014, to further encourage the growth of such ventures through which families celebrated the longevity of couturieres, the luxury car company *Jaguar* sponsored Bridal Trossueau Week. The lavish event was frequented by small groups of ladies who sought private appointments with the featured couturiers.



(Jaguar Trosseau Week 2015)

¹¹⁸ On Sunday evenings, the NDTV channel has a popular show called *Band Baaja Bride* (Band, Instruments, Bride). The premise of this show is tracking the creation of a “fairytale” wedding for middle and upper-middle class guests. In season five, India’s most successful couturier Sabyasachi Mukherjee was one of the show hosts. In each episode, he was portrayed as designing elaborate, bespoke couture for the couple. Through the few episodes I watched, I noticed that close up camera shots of the bride’s *lengha*—featuring yards of handworked embroidery—was always a major feature of the show. Also, the words “princess,” “dream,” “royalty” and “customized” were repeated several times.



Sabyasachi with a soon-to-be bride on the show *Band, Baaja, Bride* (NDTV 2015)

However, while regularly claimed as a unique service, almost all designers in India offer bespoke design and tailoring. As a result, from 2008 onwards, highly customized garments became the benchmark, rather than the distinguishing aspect of Indian luxury. While many designers I spoke with privately mourned this fact, and described the Indian client as “spoilt,” customization was a service fine artists, including painters, offered. An interview with Sabyasachi Mukherjee on the design blog *Border and Fall* elaborates on this issue. In the interview, Mukherjee mourns the normalization of customization, a phenomenon he blames on India’s “industrialist” or elite class:

I’ve seen the way some industrialists in this country commission art: they will ask a painter who is known for colour, “Can you do something in black and white for me?” It’s your ego that shows up in someone else’s work. You’re supposed to be paying for somebody’s mind but you end up using only his hand. It defeats the purpose of art and craft. [“Conscious,” 2015]

However, though many designers agreed with Sabyasachi, the practice of creating bespoke products was almost impossible to decline. On the one hand, while producing bespoke wear was the only way many designers could justify the prices of their goods, this practice also gave the client a chance to develop his or her own creative expertise, minimizing the designer’s labor even further.

To customize the “work” of craftsmen was, in many ways, to be an Indian couturier, and the more this process was emphasized, the “higher-end” the garment. Therefore, it was almost always the case that after a client had selected a garment from a high-end store, he or she would return several times for trials or what was sometimes called “fittings.” While these repeated visits were often reported as a problem of “fit,” many high-end couturiers like Tarun would see these errors in design as opportunities to increase prices. “We have to get it just right to suit *your* body,” or “I want it to *work for you*” were phrases I heard him tell dozens of clients over the year. However, when the “trials” began—a word that also invoked associations with the legal word—designer and client became engaged in a battle of creative ownership and profit.

Trials consisted of difficult negotiations. Reported problems of fit that would cost the designer his time were often countered by the encouragement to add “more work” to the garment. Again, “more work” indicated an addition of embroidery rather than more time and effort from the designer. At the end of this process, satisfied clients often reported feeling special not necessarily because the designer had offered a bespoke service that made use of his creativity, but rather, because they felt like active participants in the design process. As a young bride excitedly told me after she was finally satisfied with her wedding *lehnga*: “I love this Tarun outfit because it was not only designed for me, it was also designed by me!” (Personal Correspondence, February 26th 2014). Statements like these emphasized the importance of the designer’s label, which ironically depended upon a minimization of his labor. However, it is noteworthy that though this bride perceived herself as capable of designing couture, she still paid many lacs for Tarun’s label.

To return to Bina and her daughters, the result of their “hunt” was as follows: for the sangeet, they all chose to wear Tarun’s creations, deciding to forgo “work” for his creative style. They unanimously decided that for the wedding outfit, they’d need “something heavier,” an aesthetic demand that once again signified a desire for increased emotional and actual weight. Tarun

did not at all seem surprised with this decision, explaining to me that he did not want to do that kind of “work” anyway, and had to remain true to *his craft*. “Work” again had the connotations of embroidery and labor. His use of the word “craft” indicated a limit to his willingness to incorporate it, despite the allure of further profit.

Paying a collective bill of approximately ten lacs or twenty thousand dollars for three outfits, Bina and her daughters asserted that Tarun remained the country’s most “fun” bridal wear designer. For these clients and the market in general, he broadly represented the limit to which creative labor could be involved in the production of an Indian high fashion or couture garment. Tarun was perceived as a poor fit for the main marriage ceremony, although appropriate for “lighter” functions. “He is not a designer you take to the *mandap*,”¹¹⁹ Bina assured me. This judgment that both made him appropriate but his work not “heavy enough” depended on his simultaneous inclusion but limiting of what counted as material labor or “work.” This carefully worked out formula that fetishized many of the realities of production is what, in his clients view, makes Tarun a designer who *works the market*.

Excerpt Three: The Fashion of Craft, and the Work of Material Labor

“You can find me on the second floor, where I spend the year. My work does not go here and there”(Personal Correspondence, February 3, 2013). This was the first statement Aqil, a top bridal wear designer’s main *karigar*, made when I requested to interview him.

However, contrary to the way in which Aqil first presented himself, after many conversations his narratives began to emphasize his mobility. This mapped on to historical depictions of craftsmen. For example, Mira Mohsini (2010) notes how the demand for *karigars* in urban centers consistently increased after the 13th century, making mobility a virtual fact of life. However, I found it worth considering why Aqil did not immediately wish to reveal his mobility when we first met.

¹¹⁹The covered structure where the religious rites of the Hindu wedding take place.

Throughout this segment, I make sense of Aqil's strategy. I show that the value endowed upon Indian craftsmen depends on their ability to represent their craft as stable while embodying mobility themselves. Moreover, I show how this identity is facilitated via poaching, a term designers use to describe the process by which one designer illegitimately steals or buys out another designer's "labor"¹²⁰ to do "work" at higher pay. By exploring the multiple ways in which this dual identity of mobility and stability manifests, I affirm Mohsini's point that an *asli karigar* (real craftsman) identity is not based on the idea of a true artisan but instead on the craftsman constantly generating and re-generating representations of himself. Elaborating on this point, she states:

Firstly, the objects these artisans produce for the marketplace become fetishized because they are disembodied from the context of their making, and, in many cases, disembodied from their historical relevance. [2010: 235]

I take Mohsini's point, and suggest that this sense of being disembodied is one of which *karigars* are quite aware. However, I do not see this as an end point; for example, I show how Aqil plays upon his sense of disembodiment by choosing to invoke or downplay it selectively.

Right from our first interview, Aqil answered my fairly structured questions about how he learned his craft quite mechanically. When I commented on his jaded tone, he reported that he was used to answering these questions, and had just done several interviews for a Berlin-based author who received a generous grant to investigate the status of craftsmen in India. I nevertheless listened to the story he had just told, a narrative that seemed altered to please what he thought others and myself would like to hear.

¹²⁰ I put the word "labor" here in quotes because it is how designers use the term, especially in the context of poaching. However, I emphasize that while this is a derogatory term that has the effect of generalizing skills, designers are highly dependent upon certain individuals within this "labor" force, particularly highly-skilled craftsmen like Aqil.

Discussing his early years, Aqil began with the phrase: “*Yeh adde ka kaam*”¹²¹ *hamare ghar mein hamesha hi thaa*” (this work has been passed on over generations in the family).

Having spent most of his childhood at a large Bareilly-based export house that belonged to contemporary designer Aftab Seth’s¹²² mother, Aqil explained that he learned to produce *zardozi* work. He explained this process, which requires an *ari* (fine needle), as one that came to him naturally: “*Dekhte Dekhte mein bhin seekh gaya, haath pehle se been theek chalta tha*” (Seeing this work, I also learned it quite easily. My hand worked well from the beginning). Aqil’s emphasis on the language of handwork and lineage maps on to historical representations of craftsmen in colonial and postcolonial India (Mathur 2007; Coomaraswamy 1977). However, it is noteworthy that there is no implicit assumption of the value craft here. Rather, the work that Aqil grew up watching and learning is simply referred to by him as a technique or a process (*adde ka kaam*).

In our next meeting, I asked Aqil about the beginnings of his career in the fashion industry. I immediately noticed a change in the way he talked about his work. Gesturing over to a group of *darzis* while answering my question, he stated:

Lots of people can learn the work that a machine requires, but the work of the *adda*—the work requiring the hand—is something else. Machine tailoring can be picked up in an institution. Handwork is of/from the family. [Field Notes, February 11, 2013]

Aqil explains that the value of craft (*haat ka kaam*) in fashion emerges only in opposition to machine work that is associated with tailors. As he suggests, *adde ka kaam* is “something else” (*kuch aur*) which signifies heredity and a lack of professionalization. However, although Aqil explains that handcrafted work or material labor is more valuable than machine work, he only identifies this distinction in the context of difference. In this sense, Aqil’s statement suggests continuity rather than

¹²¹ *Adde ka kaam* is literally translated as “work on the frame.” This refers to how the process of embroidery is executed on a wooden board. After the embroidery is finished, the “work” gets lifted off the frame and transferred to the garment.

¹²² See Chapter Four for a lengthier discussion about Aftab Seth.

a break from the logic of the colonial and national periods; it shows how the binaries of Western versus Indian, the hand versus the machine that historically determined the value of craftsmen, continue to remain important (Mathur 2007; Tarlo 1996). Furthermore, given the findings in Chapter One, Aqil's perceptions also coincide with the way the Indian elite imagined the distinction between fashion and craft before NIFT's establishment.

However, in Aqil's statement both forms of work, machine and hand-executed, are encompassed by the word *kaam* (work). This terminology indicates the degree to which Aqil considers all forms of material labor somewhat comparable once they enter the fashion-producing factory space. Although, as we will see, when material labor is equated with creative labor, this conflation reaches a limit. This limit affirms the two kinds of "work" as fundamentally different. I suggest this calls for a re-examination of the hierarchy between designer and craftsman which stays in tact even if machine and hand work are blurred.

Eventually, after Aqil began engaging in lengthy conversations with me, I realized that he preferred to speak about how many designers he had worked with, or how often he had been poached. While designers discuss poaching as one of the industry's biggest problems, I show how this process directly increases the craftsman's value. Below is a short excerpt that illustrates this:

I've been working for fifteen years in this industry and eight or nine designers have sought after my work. I've worked with them all, doing embroidery and pattern work. I can adapt to different designers and understand their look. But actually, they more or less need the same thing. They do not want too much experimentation. There are not many of us left who can do the work they want. So that is why I never even have to think before I am solicited by the next designer. It's because the most important part of our work is that it represents tradition. It runs on honesty (*imandaari*). And tell me: These days, who doesn't want a traditional and honest worker? [Field Notes, September 7 2013]

This excerpt captures the immense mobility that has marked Aqil's own life, which lies in sharp contrast to his introductory statement. Moreover, it captures how the demand for his work is

fueled rather than curbed by the fact that he has “more or less [done] the same thing” for several different designers. Aqil’s narrative, which is finished with a hint of sarcasm, emphasizes how moving between designers with only superficially different “looks” does not encourage innovation and experimentation, but rather, cements a link between a particular kind of work, value and tradition.¹²³ This also emphasizes the importance of “work” or embroidery above innovation and creativity in Indian high fashion.

Moreover, as Aqil explains, craft and tradition is also synonymous with honesty (*imandaari*). This virtue is ironically endowed to craftsmen via the problematic act of poaching that designers accuse each other of. While designers lose credibility as they poach, craftsmen like Aqil, who are the objects of this exchange, become more valuable in the process.

I suggest that the way in which Aqil and other craftsmen benefit from poaching is interesting in light of Moon’s discussion on the subject (2012:175-7). In her ethnography, poaching is a major threat for her informants who are students at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. For them, poaching arises from the “constant fear that if they quit their job, there is someone right behind them” (177). While poaching has the same associations of replacement across both contexts, for Aqil, poaching allows him and other craftsmen to experience mobility and increase their value. Unlike Moon’s informants, rather than the fear that there is someone “right behind him,” there is a sense of security because there is not. I argue that this sense of security and value that Aqil gains primarily depends upon asserting himself as distinct from who he is not: a fashion designer. This distinction is elaborated upon in the excerpt below. I will go on to unpack this statement in the next section.

¹²³ As I mentioned in Chapter One, the issue of poaching or sharing craftsmen is often deemed the cause for plagiarism in the industry.

I have no desire to be called a designer. I'm a *karigar*. What we do has a different place. The *job* [my emphasis] of designers is very new...What we do is historical, and has been going on for years. Our works depends on/functions because of honesty (*imandaari*). [Personal Communication, December 10, 2013]

Job Versus Kaam

In this excerpt, Aqil makes clear that he does not want to be called, or referred to as a designer. He makes a distinction between a designer and *karigar* by suggesting that *karigars* have “a different place;” here, Aqil re-invokes his “place” as fixed or stable, as he did in his introductory statement. Further, Aqil proceeds to distinguish this “place” as historical as opposed to the “newness” that marks the designer. This is most clearly expressed by his marked use of the English word “job” for a designer, versus the Hindi word *kaam* to describe his own labor. I suggest that his inability to translate what a designer does into “kaam” points to the notion that “work” in India was traditionally seen as craft, or similar to the material labor historically associated with artisans.¹²⁴ On the other hand, a “job” is associated with something “new” and from the outside.

I suggest the job versus *kaam* binary is a way in which Aqil reifies a division between material and creative labor, craftsman and designer. While Aqil uses the word “kaam” to describe the work of craftsmen, “kaam” excludes the designer who does a “job.” Moreover, beyond pointing to differences in skill, this division affirms Kuldova’s argument in her essay “Laughing at Luxury” (2013), in which she argues that the “parallel economies” (Sarkar 2010) that underpin the production of luxury in India are dependent upon maintaining a constant distinction between fashion and craft, designer and craftsman. Building on Sarkar, Kuldova states:

¹²⁴ In a recent article published in the popular journal, *The Atlantic*, William Deresiewicz argues that the current “death of the artist and the birth of the creative entrepreneur” depends upon an erasure of the artist’s craft. He argues that instead of writing or painting, artists must take on multiple identities to present themselves as entrepreneurs. More important than their skill in the arts is the ability to tweet, customize, curate, and publicize their work. I suggest that Aqil’s rejection of the designer label can be understood as an attempt to keep the historical meaning of an artist—which was historically synonymous with being a craftsman—intact (2015).

The idea of two parallel universes in India relates to the notion of parallel economies (Sarkar 2010) and the split between the formal (organized) and informal (unorganized) sector, a split that mirrors the dichotomies between the neoliberal capitalism economy and the vernacular economy. [172]

Sarkar's concept generally reflects how high-end designers understand the division of labor within the industry. For example, in an interview published online, highest-retailing designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee, who is credited with employing over 3000 craftsmen, states: "A craftsman is as good as his skill and a designer is as good as his mind. So in the process of trying to make money if one of us lose our skill set or our minds, we all crumble" ("Conscious," 2015). This statement reflects the degree to which many designers like Mukherjee view craft and fashion, designer and craftsman as distinct. Moreover, while Mukherjee points to the importance of both designer and craftsman, the statement also functions as a warning. As the article goes on to explain, the "real threat" to Indian fashion, according to Mukherjee, is the craftsman who wants to become a "middle-man" or small-scale businessmen.¹²⁵ In other words, it is the craftsman who wants to become a designer.

I suggest Aqil's statement is illuminating in thinking about fashion through the idea of parallel economies. While Aqil subscribes to the idea of distinct labor groups that map on to two separate economies, I suggest that Sarkar's notion, reflected in Sabyasachi's insight, does not account for the ways in which Aqil and other craftsmen who belong to the "vernacular economy" also construct these parallels. Aqil's case suggests an active resistance to the designer label even though it indicates a higher education and professionalization. Instead, by insisting on being called a craftsman, he makes a claim to a "lower" position that ironically endows him with both more mobility and value than a designer.

¹²⁵ See Chapter Three for a discussion on how Masterjis, who oversee karigars, employ business terms to reflect this shift.

Conclusion

This chapter began with interrogating what work means for Neelima, a self-confessed “small designer” who runs the label *Ice Four Western Wear*. For Neelima, work is a problem that is rooted in a discrepancy between what she considers to be creative labor and what gets counted as valuable “work.” This also maps on to her refusal to produce what gets slotted as Indian fashion. I suggest that in Neelima’s early career, her struggle to be a successful designer can broadly be understood through her inability to reconcile the hierarchy between material and creative labor, designer and craftsman.

At Tarun high-end bridal boutique, we saw how clients shape the demand for a particular notion of work that endows couture with value. I show how Tarun’s “work” for clients represents “good” and “heavy” (enough) labor. I show how this balance, articulated through the language clients use, like “good finish” and “heaviness,” organizes the relationship between material and creative labor, work and fit, designer and craftsman. However, I show how in complying with this standard, designers ironically minimize their own roles in the design process. I suggest that their own creative desires become not only secondary to the work of craftsmen, but also sometimes even to the design expertise clients claim.

In the final excerpt, I discuss what work means for a *karigar* or craftsman. Clients assume that both the *karigar* and the “work” they produce is “traditional”; this assumption also imagines them as geographically bounded and stable. However, I suggest that these associations are both reductive and partial. By exploring Aqil’s narrative, I show how he has an important hand in perpetuating the link between craft, immobility, and tradition, while personally embodying experiences that represent the opposite.

These findings confirm that the production of value in Indian couture depends on keeping a parallel economy distinctly inhabited by craftsman and designer alive. However, rather than

disrupting this hierarchy, I have shown how craftsmen also see value in maintaining these differences. I suggest this is because of the lack of power designers have in the creative process.

The implications of these findings are significant and build on the previous chapter. In Chapter One, I discussed the original meaning of fashion in India as rooted in the production of ready-to-wear, mass-produced, Western designs. I argued that while the elite superficially championed this form of production, their personal commitments remain with Indian craft and textile industries. I suggest that this discrepancy continues to play out in contemporary Indian couture where “work” that represents the Indian craftsman continues to be the primary mark of value. Thus, even though many designers who are marked as old school elite producers dismiss bridal wear, I suggest that their uninterrupted commitment to craft over ready-to-wear fashion explains why designers like Neelima face some difficulties.

Given the *heavy* emphasis on traditional “work” in the Indian high fashion market, the training NIFT students receive is, then, called into question. However, while the production of Indian couture demands the kind of “work” NIFT students are only superficially trained to produce, this fact does not necessarily affect their ability to succeed. Instead, because of how little designers are actually expected to participate in the couture production process, their training as ready-to-wear designers does not automatically position them as disadvantaged. Rather, as I explain in Chapter One, their socio-economic backgrounds that pre-endow them with certain privileges on campus continue to shape their possibility for success outside of it.

Now, I proceed to Part Two, where I explore how the value placed on couture, work, and the Indian craftsman is challenged, subverted and resisted. The next chapter is therefore what is technically referred to as a Counter Sample, or what functions as another lens by which to view the given understandings of value in Indian high fashion

PART TWO

Resistances, Subversions and Alternatives

As long as you're not a Kalra you're not really valuable and if you're not a Masterji, well, you're probably disposable. – Kriti, Design Team Employee, Rishabh Kalra Designs.*

Chapter Three: Counter Sample

Making Brothers out of Masters: Patriarchy and Kinship in A Family-Run Indian Couture Firm

There are two public secrets in Indian fashion: 1) the quality of Masterjis—or head craftsmen who oversee the factory's tailors and karigars (embroiderers and other hand-laborers)—determine the success of the business and 2) the family business model, which has been in decline through the post-liberalization era,¹²⁶ promises longevity.¹²⁷ In this chapter, I show how an upper caste, biologically related Bania¹²⁸ family that owns and runs one of the industry's top labels, Rishabh Kalra Designs,* straddles both secrets by negotiating ideas of proximity: while creating fictive kin networks across men of diverse religious backgrounds, they largely exclude women from their construct of family. Most centrally, I illustrate how keeping these secrets maintain class and caste inequality (Crenshaw 2007; Ortner 2014).

I demonstrate my point by unpacking a complex relationship between a (Muslim) Masterji and a Bania (Hindu) business owner that exemplifies the notion of fictive family, and facilitates the marginalization of female employees. For the Kalras, the predominantly young, middle-class, Hindu women who make up the Design Team perceivably present “problems” and should not be too close. While female employees frequently quit work in search of better work options or marriage, they are often accused of being disloyal, untrustworthy or, in the words of a Kalra, “having their interests elsewhere.” However, I suggest that while female employees in the factory are imagined as

¹²⁶ In his book *The History of Indian Business After Independence* (2004) historian Dwijendra Tripathi estimates that between 1970 and 1990, at least 30 big [Indian] family businesses divided.

¹²⁷ While it is difficult to come up with a number of how many family-run firms there are in India today, there are several examples of high-end designers who work with at least one member of their nuclear family. For example, among the industry's top designers it is well known that Tarun Tahiliani works with his sister and wife, Rohit Bal and Sabyasachi are in business with their siblings while Gaurav Gupta works with his brothers. As I discuss, it is generally the rule that as a designer becomes “bigger,” his family naturally gets involved in running the business. From my own estimates, I would say that at least 50% of top designers have family businesses.

pre-determinately marked with certain characteristics (Lynch 2008; Ong 1987) their designated roles in producing fashion mark them as marginal to “real” business matters.

Moreover, while this form of business kinship appears “new,” I argue that it is consistent with how Punjabi Baniya and other upper-caste communities have historically relied on the trope of proximity to produce themselves (Dickey 2000, Qayum and Ray 2003; Spodek 1969). Caste, proximity and gender also intersect in the anthropology of domestic work in India (Baviskar and Ray 2011; Dickey 2000; Qayum and Ray 2003). Engaging with this scholarship, I illuminate how, under the guise of brotherhood and closeness, the Kalra business practice similarly perpetuates inequalities between an historically upper-caste business elite and India’s traditional Muslim artisans as well as middle-class female employees. Broadly, I show how through the practice of producing Indian high fashion, the latter remain on the fringes of a self-congratulatory neoliberal economy (Chakrabarty 1994; Fernandes 2000; Moshini 2010).

However, contrary to the scholarship on domestic work, I also show Masterjis counter notions of family imposed on them by appropriating what they consider corporate or professional vocabulary in contrast to the language of kinship. While the owners of production, the three Kalra brothers and their father, endow familial and heartfelt titles upon Masterjis, they describe themselves as CEOs, use cerebral metaphors, and express desires for corporate stakes in the company. Through this language that disrupts “traditional” metaphors associated with the heart in South Asia (Marsden 2007; Varma 2013) which maintains the colonial stereotype of Indian craftsmen as traditional and static, I show how Masterjis problematize the way in which they have historically been imagined (Coomaraswamy 1909; Mohsini 2010; Subramanyam 1987).

I ground this discrepancy between the imagined Kalra “family” and the Masterji’s assertion of themselves as “professionals”—a difference that business historian Dwijendra Tripathi (2004) points out as key in the shift from liberalization to post-liberalization practices—through the

extensive work on “real” or fictive families within textile, garment, and fashion industries (Cairolì 1998; DeNeve 2014; Luvaas 2013; Menning 1997; Moon 2011; Yanagisako 2002). As many scholars have noted, with the expansion of Indian businesses and the increasing power of banks and public institutions to provide loans, by the late 1990s, the buzzwords “professional” and “trust” held equal, if not more power than family (Harris 2003; Manikutty 2000; Sharma and Rao 2000; Ward 2000). In the words of John Harris, with the onset of liberalization, tight-knit biological “circles” of trust had to be “widened.” However, contrary to Tripathi and other scholars who assume “family,” “professional,” and “trust” to be distinct terms, I show how the Kalra owner-Masterji relationship is grounded within a specific construct of “family” as tailored by, rather than contrary to, “new,” post-liberalized “professional” Indian business practice. Specifically, I show how two forms of trust—one financial and the other emotional—emerge to reify the divide between the “real” and fictive family ostensibly blurred by this process.

While anthropologists have determined that the term fictive kinship is to an extent invalid because it can describe both biologically tied and non-related families (Weston 1997:105), they argue that in the context of production practices, “meaningful work” (Carioli 2012; Luvaas 2013) and “intimate labor” (Moon 2011) often emerge through these structures. As anthropologists writing about garment and fashion industries suggest, these feelings and emotions either mitigate or entirely counter capitalistic exploitation on the shop floor. For instance, in her ethnography of a New York-based fashion label, Christina Moon (2011) observes that an analysis on factory worker practices “expose(s) a puzzling paradox.” She states:

While fashion workers across the factory hierarchy “reproduce a system that endlessly values profit and capital accumulation, they themselves embody values of the opposite: the pursuit of creativity, beauty, work with *family* [my emphasis] and creating social ties through the practice of their everyday work (2).

This finding is important in showing how capitalist exploitation is itself refracted through complex social prisms. However, I argue that it neglects to account for how “values” such as beauty, love, and family can themselves be vehicles to perpetuate social and economic inequality. Thus, while taking into account how “meaningful work” can “defy the hegemony of corporate capitalism” (Luvaas 2013), I follow Yanagisako and Collier (1987) in considering the family to always be a contested concept that is implicated in relations of power. Meanwhile, while considering that “chosen” families can be just as “real” as biogenetic ties (Weston 1997), I call for a closer look at the choosing process to show it is complicated by who is doing the choosing and who is chosen. I suggest this reveals how the language of kinship may be a way of glossing over or obscuring inequalities.

Thus, I argue that fictive kinship structures in garment industries are rarely panaceas for equality (Nguyen Tu’s 2010:298) but also show how family structures can emphasize particular traits, such as speaking English or what Masterjis call *baath cheeth karna* (knowing how to converse for social gain) as endowed from *janam* (birth). I show how, while for the Kalras, family is a means by which to claim proximity, for the Masterjis, family is the vehicle by which unbridgeable differences are produced.

Chapter Structure

Throughout this chapter, I borrow from Qayum and Ray (2003) in taking a “relational approach” to expose perspectives across all levels of a professional hierarchy. In the first section, I introduce the owners, the Kalra family, through a narrative about a significant workers' strike.¹²⁹ Here, I show how the politics of making Rishabh Kalra, an eponymous brand that ostensibly stands for a single man but comes to represent an entire family, depends on an idealized construction of family and brotherhood. I suggest how this emerges through the two notions of trust in the factory.

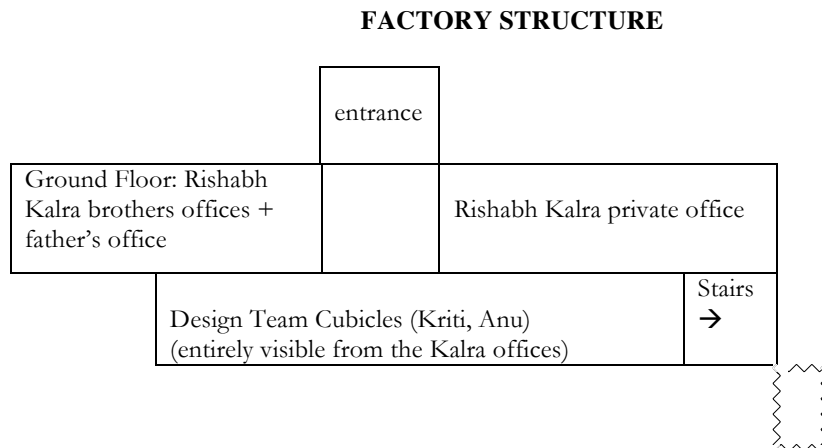
¹²⁹ I re-introduce the strike story in Part Three of this chapter, as told from the perspective of Masterjis.

The first is economic and strictly contained within the biological family while the second is romantic, sentimental and extendable to men who become “like brothers.” Both forms however, depend on excluding women.

In the second section, I shift my focus to the Design Team, a group of young, middle-class women who work for Rishabh Kalra. I show how female employees struggle for “respect,” or a form of non-economic compensation akin to the notion of “self respect” in Philippe Bourgois' ethnography (2003) of crack sellers in Harlem. By tracking their responsibilities, much of which involves facilitating relationships between men and *chaloing* (moving forward or passing) work, I show how female employees become largely excluded from “family” matters while being integral to “business” ones.

In the third section, I focus on Masterjis, or those who are considered softhearted and the most “like brothers.” I shed light on Ashar, the head master of the couture house. Unlike the language of kinship used by the Kalras, I highlight the language Masterjis use to describe their roles (such as a stake, or CEO). I argue that this act is an important way Masterjis respond to the stifling structure of family they are drawn into.

Below is a rough map that sketches out the space and layout of Rishabh Kalra’s factory where this chapter is set:



1st Floor: Western Garments Production Floor
Darzi Work Stations w/sewing machines
*head masterji

finishing ladies
between floors
(ironing/dry cleaning/folding)

2nd Floor: Indian Garments Production Floor
Darzi Work Stations w/sewing machines
*head masterji

3rd Floor: Indian Garments Production Floor
Darzi Work Stations * head masterji

PART ONE

The Kalra Firm

At Rishabh Kalra's large four-storey factory located in the suburbs of Noida, there are two different narratives about a worker's strike that took place in 2011. One Friday evening, at Rishabh's spacious apartment in Greater Kailash, the Kalra brothers introduced me to their version. Rishabh had been living at this flat for a few months after having contentiously moved out of the joint family home where all the Kalra brothers, their wives, and children live.

As Rishabh and his older brother Aakash stretched out on the large leather couches in Rishabh's living room, they replenished their glasses with scotch. I had little idea that I would hear this story many times in the future, and meticulously wrote down as much as I could. Later, I was so familiar with it that I knew exactly how it should be told. As with this and each subsequent telling, Aakash would always begin:

You see, [during the time of the strike] there was a curse on our family business. Our *chachi* (youngest paternal uncle's wife) had been going to our family temple and asking the gods to curse us. She was angry with her husband and wanted revenge against the entire family. This curse went on for many months. First, *chacha* (father's younger brother) got sick. Then, she cursed our father. It got really bad when it hit the factory. Suddenly all the masters who we had known for years began to work against us. One of them, the worst, *Munna* (nickname) Masterji made a plan. He wanted everyone to leave the

factory and look for work with higher pay. Suddenly there was a strike for three days. Three days! Nothing was done. We lost a lot of business. This was all a part of her (chachi's) plan. [Field Notes, April 4, 2013]

Rishabh went on to explain that a family-owned Bania temple in West Delhi had always protected their home and business. To explain the factory strike that unfolded as a result of their chachi's curse or what he equated to an "evil eye" on the family,¹³⁰ Rishabh and Aakash confirmed the spiritual hand that they perceived to be at the heart of the business crisis.

However, while the three-day strike was undoubtedly the worst time the business and the family faced, its resolution was also framed as the best day the Kalras ever saw. Narrated as a kind of breakthrough, its "end" marked the beginning of a new force: Rishabh, the youngest Kalra son—after whom the brand is named but also who remains fairly marginal to "business matters"—emerged as a new hope. At this point in the narration, Rishabh would take over, claiming full authority over his emergence. He began:

For the next three days, the workers just sat in a field, refusing to work and protesting to quit. I couldn't believe it. They said the pay was too less [sic] for the work they did. Even my right hand Masterjis like Ashar just refused to come back. I was like, what kind of spell is this on our family? Dad tried everything; Aakash tried convincing them. Nothing worked. But then, I knew it was my turn to speak up and so I did. I felt something inside me. So, I got up on my car, stood on it, and began a speech (he stood on his couch to enact this). I told them (slightly laughing) *HUM SUBH RISHABH KALRA HAIN* (we are all Rishabh Kalra). And that worked like magic. Then they understood! And the next day, the lights were back on, all the machines were back, the embroiderers continued...I had to show them that they were part of our family; they were all part of me, somehow, just *like my brothers*. You see they have very *soft hearts* [my emphasis] and this is what I had to appeal to" (Field Notes, April 4, 2013).

¹³⁰ There has been a considerable amount of anthropological work on black magic and the evil eye in South Asia (See Maloney 1976). However, this subject lies outside the scope of this project and my expertise.

Rishabh jumped off the couch and took a big swig of his drink, as if ending a performance. His dramatic conclusion had the effect of sealing the story. He anticipated that no listener would question it any further. Moreover, his concluding appeal to the “soft hearts” of his “brother-like” Masterjis emphasized his skill in negotiating “business” and “family” matters.

I suggest that the focus on the heart in Rishabh’s language is significant in determining his apparently successful negotiation: it appears as what Magnus Marsden (2007) has called the “source of truth” or the only “genuine” part of a South Asian body. In supposedly tapping this heart, Rishabh imagined himself as achieving a feeling of proximity that he assumed both the masters needed and only he was able to deliver. Moreover, strikingly, while the story was self-celebratory, there was little individual ownership over it: its “success” rested on a distribution of credit.

The idea of proximity or a “like brother” network celebrated by the Kalras can be read through an important point Qayum and Ray (2003) make in their ethnographic work on urban domestic household employees and their relationships to “modern” middle-class employers. They note that while middle-class employers often consider their staff “part of the family,” even within the context of the “new, modern home” where live-in domestic help is increasingly rare, this imagined proximity allows owners to actually increase demands on workers. I take up this point and follow these scholars in similarly exploring the double-edged nature of proximity, especially how this claim can bring feudal and colonial past hierarchies to the present.

The New Khandaan (House) Of Fashion and The Two Forms of Trust

Sylvia Yanagisako’s ethnography on family fashion firms in Como, Italy begins with a memorable adage: in Italy, the grandfather begins the business, the father builds it and the son destroys it (2002:1). This narrative provides an interesting point of comparison for the Indian textile and fashion industry where upper caste family businesses—including Baniyas—have historically dominated (Harris 2003). Across both contexts, men are assumed to be the primary architects and

managers of the business, exemplifying a patriarchal structure in the strictest sense (Ortner 2014; Stacey 1997). Additionally, there is a common belief that akin to the Italian house, the Indian family business “breaks down” in the third generation (Tripathi 2004). However, while the Italian adage implies that a family business firm is made over at least three generations and several decades of history, the Indian fashion family business as exemplified by the Kalra brothers is usually built in one (i.e. the last) decade itself.

In order to capture both the similarity and difference between the Italian fashion house and the dominant model of the Indian couture business, I use the term *fashion khandaan* (fashion house) to imply how the “Western” notion of a fashion house is “locally” reworked within this context. Moreover, like the Western European fashion *house*, I show how the patriarchal dominance of this firm is generated through the relationships the Kalra men share with each other, which they reify through their complicated relationships with their female staff.

As I have mentioned previously, in the Kalra business *khandaan*, all the Kalra men—with the exception of Rishabh—occupy a single residence and work for the same business. This is considered an important part of their Baniya identity, a caste group in which business and family have historically been coterminous (Spodek 1969). Moreover, unlike the Italian adage, which stereotypes the roles actions men play in the businesses, the brothers are here captured by their apparently fixed personalities. People across the industry often noted that the Varun, the eldest brother, is the most serious or *seedha* (straight-edge), the middle (Aakash) is the manager and most business like, and the youngest (Rishabh), is the wild, creative force. I suggest this stereotyping has notable roots in traditional Baniya structures where the oldest son is imagined as responsible, efficient, and the appropriate heir to the family businesses (Spodek 1969). While Varun was perceived to neatly fit this stereotype, he was seen by some as actually too “straight” to handle tricky business matters. This description that I initially understood as solely related to his personality, I later guessed, was also a

comment on his sexuality and his inability to deal with the gay men who dominate the fashion business.

I met Akhilesh Kalra, the father of the Kalra brothers and the head of the family, many times during my fieldwork, both at the factory and at the Kalra family home. We enjoyed pleasant conversations in which he shared news about his main interest – his local rotary. Akhilesh explained that in the past, selling his steel business, which Varun also worked in, and a part of their family home in West Delhi in order to invest in fashion was unimaginable. However, with the current annual business turnover at approximately 80 crore, he felt assured that this was the best decision to make. Recalling the “bad time” or what the brothers had referred to as the “black magic” cast on the family, Akhilesh explained to me that “it would take a whole family” to counter what the Kalras had suffered. In his explanation, it was a family business, growth, and security rather than a fashion business in which he was investing. Moreover, in his explanation, he reminded me that for the Baniya community, “business matters are family matters,” (Personal Correspondence, May 8, 2013) a statement that indicates that the industry in which one invests matters very little. He assured me that it was the pre-determined “circle of trust”—or biological relationships—that would maintain the “Kalra name.”

However, his idea of family was also predicated upon exclusion. It wasn't long before I noticed that Akhilesh's wife, Sarla, hardly ever came to the factory and was never present at family business meetings. However, her role was felt daily with the arrival of lunch tiffin boxes that were delivered from the Kalra home, each customized to suit the individual tastes of her sons. Sarla would often call a few hours after lunchtime to ask how the meal was. Many times, I would hear Rishabh disrupt his work to pick up her call and speak to her in an exaggerated child-like voice, emphasizing his role as her youngest son. However, Sarla remained what Dhaliwal (1998) has called

a “silent worker,” a gendered figure whom he describes as both key to the accumulation of family profit in Asian businesses but necessarily invisible.

It became evident from my early days in the factory that Aakash—the middle brother—was *the* boss and for many exemplified the most Baniya part of the business. I heard him described as “very money-conscious,” “business-wise” and even stingy when I asked what this meant. Nevertheless, his importance and power was made clear to me right away. His room in the factory was the largest and was always air-conditioned throughout the summer. All business meetings and discussions about the directions, aims, and goals of the company were discussed in Aakash’s room. I was sometimes allowed into these meetings but other times, I would be asked to leave the room when I was forewarned that the “business matter” became too much of a “family matter.” My exit from Aakash’s office that was always politely directed by him emphasized that “family” was made of Kalra men, and everyone else was an “outsider.”

While I soon grew privy to what the Kalra brothers considered “inside” information and family matters, Rishabh assured me that what was discussed inside the closed factory doors would not interest me. Though I privately disagreed, I decided not to push my luck and respect the lines of confidentiality that protected the biological family. However, as my relationship with Rishabh grew close, he voluntarily began to update me. I learned from him that many family discussions were mostly about the “Kalra Trust.”

While I found it too invasive to probe into the financial specifics of this, I was able to gauge quickly that this trust was both biological and economic. Its “selectivity” (Harris 2003) was its most important feature: it only circulated within the circle of Kalra men. Similar to a financial fund, it was where all the profits from the company were collected and re-distributed amongst Akhilesh and the three Kalra brothers. This was done annually, in lieu of a monthly salary. Moreover, this model

followed the way in which Baniya families have historically conducted business, particularly in cotton mill industries (Spodek 1969).

There was also a hierarchy implicit in this trust that corresponded to family structure rather than the way the company publically branding itself. While I was never able to get exact figures, Rishabh confessed that he received the smallest amount each year, being the youngest brother in the family and the least “business-oriented” of the brothers despite being the face and name of the brand. This was a “fact” he told me in private, which “made [his] family as much a poison as a medicine” and being a Baniya “as much of a curse as a blessing” (Personal Correspondence, April 20th 2013). However, when I asked him whether he was concerned that he would not receive an equal share, he quickly assured me with certainty that there was a basic level of trust that the Kalra men shared, which “made” his brand. As Harris notes, as is characteristic of other family businesses, this form of trust was articulated as the ability to “believe despite uncertainty” (Harris 2003). Moreover, as I state in my introduction, the Kalras were also popular amongst wealthy Baniya consumers; this is also perhaps what Rishabh was hinting at when he suggested that his family—which represented a caste group—“made” the brand.

In the next section, “The Non-Family,” I explore the insights provided to me by a group of women who constituted the Rishabh Kalra Design Team. I show how, in contrast to Masterjis, women were imagined as disloyal, cerebral, and untrustworthy. Rather than affirming that these characteristics are fixed however, I show how they come to be seen as true through factory work.

PART TWO

The Non-family: Women and The Search for Respect

The Rishabh Kalra Design Team is a group of six female employees who are all in their 20s. The Kalras receive dozens of applications to fill these positions each year, particularly during Placement Week, an annual recruitment event held across fashion universities in India. While there

is nothing on the application that suggests this position is for women only, it is considered to be implied by the job description: both Rishabh and his employees reported that the salary of approximately 40-50,000 per month, the superficial description of “assisting the designer” and the stated working hours of 9am to 6pm were better suited to middle-class women who were likely to be driving themselves or taking public transport. However, what is less known about this position—and what is believed to make it particularly suited to women from their own perspectives—is that it largely involves facilitating, advancing, or *chalaoning* relationships between men at the cost of their own power.

To get a better grasp on how gender dynamics play out in factory work, I dedicated a significant portion of my fieldwork to shadowing Rishabh’s Design Team. Anu, who soon became my primary informant from the Design Team, noticed this, and considered it “a pleasant surprise.” After a few days of shadowing her, she told me in a slightly cynical tone: “Everyone is only interested in the designers and the *Masterjis*. . . everyone here is treated better than us.” She further advised that the somewhat naive questions that I had already asked her—including why Design Team members had such high turnover—would soon be answered if I simply observed their work, which in her words was always met by a “lack of respect.” I noted this sentiment was echoed by ladies across the team who felt excluded from the patriarchal networks that underpinned Kalra business practices.

In her ethnography on garment workers in Morocco, Laetitia Carioli (2012) argues that women “transform the workshop into a household” as they work and make sense of their given identities as daughters, sisters, mothers, and wives. She explains that this is a way in which factory girls show resistance to the patriarchal business in which they are enmeshed. However, she concludes that their quest to “find meaning in their labor” through the adoption of fictive kinship only makes them more susceptible to exploitation. While I take Carioli’s call to look at the way in

which fictive familial structures perhaps exacerbate exploitative working conditions, I differ from her in the assumption that women are even included within the large, overarching patriarchal family that defines the business. Instead, in this case I show how women who work for Rishabh Kalra find that if any “meaning” is possible at all, it is through a politics of exclusion.

I quickly learned that the workspace that was allocated to the Design Team was what most disturbed the women who worked for Rishabh Kalra, and symbolized the “lack of respect” they experienced. In the year and a half that I conducted fieldwork, the Design Team’s workspace changed considerably. While it remained directly in front of Rishabh and Aakash’s rooms, I noted its transformation from a casual zone in which each employee had considerable space to put up photos and posters to a cramped space organized by small, standard cubicles. This change ironically accompanied the growth and success of the business. With little space to eat lunch and converse with each other, the joke among Design Team members became, having an aisle seat in this new set up was a huge privilege and that the overall look resembled a call center. The team reported a larger, collective feeling of being dispensable.

Furthermore, when I heard different members of the Design Team complain about the lack of space to Aakash, he consistently gave them the same answer: the new set up allowed the workers to be “more professional.” Similarly, their request to have soft music in the background was something that he consistently told them was “on the agenda” and the shrinkage of their space was chalked up as “good for the company.” What this really meant, in Anu’s blunt translation, was that it was “good for the Kalras.” I later found out that shrinking employee space was directly related to creating seating or “atmospheric” rooms for clients. Thus, rather than “professionalism” and

“family” appearing in opposition, as was observed by India’s post-liberalization period (cf. Tripathi 2004), we see here how a family-run firm can co-opt “professionalism” to further its own name.¹³¹

One afternoon, when Kriti and I were sharing our lunches at her tiny cubicle that had a small photograph with the caption, “I love French fries almost as much as I love fashion,” pinned to the bulletin board, she explained how, for the team, the change in spaces mirrored a larger “problem of respect:”

We work night and day for this brand. None of us really have lives. Except on Sunday. Still, we do not get simple things that we ask for, like space...I never got my pay increase promised to me last year.

When I asked Aakash one day, finally when I had the guts, he just said, “You know our Western wear sales have not been that good this year...” Now, how can I tell him that is wrong behavior? The design team always gets screwed. Masterjis always get their bonuses; the brothers will bow to them.

But for us girls, in any factory, there is just a “problem of respect.” [Interview, July 14, 2013]

Kriti’s statement both assumes what Masterjis want and conveys that the problem of “respect” female employees experience is predicated upon gender differences. Moreover, her definition of “respect,” I suggest, is similar to Philippe Bourgois’ (2003) discussion of self-respect in Spanish Harlem: for Kriti, not calling Aakash out on practices she considers unethical was to maintain what Bourgois’ informants considered to be “an autonomous self dignity” (8). However, different from Bourgois’ informants, who saw their acts of self-respect as cultivated through resistance, for Kriti, self-respect stemmed from allowing the difference between being “screwed” and being “bowed to” to continue.

While Anu, Kriti and others framed their work as met by “a lack of respect,” my private conversations with Rishabh and Aakash presented these different women as good employees but at

¹³¹ In Chapter One, “professionalism” was discussed in the context of NIFT classrooms. In a lecture to students, “professionalism” was equated with following rules, being on time, and having little agency; still, students were encouraged to adopt this identity. Here, we see how this lack of freedom that students are advised to get used to early in their education, plays out. For example, we see how “professionalism” intersects with gender.

the same time as “preoccupied,” “distracted,” and “untrustworthy.” On another occasion, Aakash attempted to explain the stunted lives of Design Team employees to me: “All of them (girls) eventually leave us, either for marriage or another designer. Their heart is not in this work, even though their heads may be” (Personal Correspondence, May 8, 2013). This description implied that unlike male masters, women workers were not “soft” and their hearts were not inclined to the couture business. However, while it was not a challenge to name several Design Team employees who had left Rishabh Kalra designs for these reasons, I suggest these conditions that the Kalras imagined as innate to all “girls” were often induced by the main task they were delegated with: to *chhalao* (facilitate) work. Moreover, it was interesting to note the way in which their lack of soft-heartedness was perceived as rooted in their inability to be loyal to a single man or a patriarchal family business.

Getting Piece Made, Chhalao-ing Work

While many of Rishabh’s design team members opened up to me easily, I was fortunate to develop a close relationship with Anu. Many days of fieldwork consisted of following her as she rushed up and down factory stairs and in and out of small rooms sprawled across the production floors. While the hectic pace of her day-to-day work was something that took time for me to grasp, she assured me that I would soon get used to this “way of work,” which she warned could entail having lunch at 4pm and required wearing casual, flat rubber slippers. Trusting her, I soon traded in my low-heeled sandals.

Anu shared with me that she had made considerable sacrifices to work in fashion, and with Rishabh Kalra in particular. Most notable of these was the decision to move to a one-bedroom apartment in the suburbs where rents were affordable, but this was still an hour-and-a-half commute from the factory and several hours away from her family home. The commute was easily one of Anu’s biggest complaints about the job, but with her salary and rising New Delhi rents, there

seemed to be no other way to manage. However, a single, all-encompassing term she called “exposure” or “opening oneself up to another kind of life, work, and opportunities” outweighed all sacrifices. It was clear that exposure was both something Anu prioritized and desired, but also something that came at a high price.

Most of Anu’s work and the work of other Design Team employees was to ensure the timely production of sample pieces, or in the language of Design Team employees, “to get pieces made.” This objective meant overseeing the production of a sample or garment from its inception (the sketch) to the end of the process when it packaged and shipped off to the store. Over the three years that Anu had worked with Rishabh, she had “gotten several pieces made.” In explaining this, Anu displayed a great degree of independence: walking around a single floor, she could point to several counter samples—the perfected version of the original piece—that she had “gotten made.” I could see that the clothes she pointed to had Anu’s name written on a receipt like paper and stapled to their packaging. This indicated that they had been made under her supervision.

While it was certainly true that these pieces were to some extent “hers” and were referred to by the Masterjis as “Anu Madam’s pieces,” the ownership she claimed over them was limited. Getting pieces made involved running multiple times and passing important messages between Rishabh, his Masterjis and his tailors. For example, if there was additional fabric required for a piece to be completed, it was marked as Anu’s responsibility, as was checking embroidery patterns and judging when a piece was good enough to take down to the designer for his inspection. In these cases, when she determined a piece was ready for Rishabh’s judgment, she would sign a receipt that depicted a clear flow chart of responsibilities ending with her approval. This was what Masterjis and tailors called “passing” a piece which often followed a request to her or another design team employee to “*chaalo*” it (make it work, let it move forward). Many times when I shadowed her as she walked through production floors, Anu would be stopped by a pleading request from a Masterji to

“*chhalao*” something that had been stalled. However, I observed that Anu would often herself slow down this process. She knew, and I soon learned, that the moment she would sign off on a piece and approve the work of a Masterji, *karigar* or tailor, it was out of her hands, both in terms of credit and responsibility. In other words, signing a paper also rendered women’s work forgotten or invisible (Dhaliwal 1998). What moved ahead or what was *chhalaoed* (facilitated) was relationships between men. As the piece would be passed on to clients for purchase, only the designer and perhaps the Masterji would be credited.

Not-Kalras

Towards the end of my fieldwork, during a slightly more relaxed workday, both Kriti and Anu decided that they would reveal a secret to me. Not entirely surprised, I learned that they had both decided to quit their jobs at Rishabh Kalra before his next major show. When I reached out to inquire why, they said I could guess their reasons. They reiterated that the brand offered them “no respect, and no growth,” and to encompass these various reasons Kriti jokingly came up with the term “Not-Kalra,” to describe what felt to them as an impenetrable ceiling. They both shared that they had suffered enough and “gotten enough exposure.” This exposure, which had for years weighed more than their sacrifices, had finally reached a limit.

By the time I was writing my dissertation, Rishabh’s show had passed. I hadn’t heard from Kriti or Anu for a long time. However, as they predicted, I saw both ladies at the show, enthusiastically waving to me through the huge crowd. While I could not find them afterwards, I could see even from my distant seat that both were wearing his designs and gave him a standing ovation when he came out to bow. Moreover, through our social media connections I saw that they continued to support Rishabh’s work. I read these simple gestures as symbolic of their loyalty and respect, which extended beyond their professional realities. When I inquired of their whereabouts much later, Aakash told me that as he had “called it,” the girls had moved “elsewhere.” There was

no further analysis. He also showed little awareness of their continued loyalty despite having moved on.

PART THREE

Making Brothers out of Masters

My first entrance into the distinct lives of the factory's Masterjis was when I inquired about the workers' strike. I first raised the topic while in conversation with Ateeb* Masterji, a Pattern Master who sat on the second floor of the factory. Though happy to discuss it from the outset, his version was much simpler. Pausing to swish chewing tobacco around his lightly stained mouth, he responded to my questions matter-of-factly and with notable authority. Below is an excerpt from my first discussion about the strike with him:

There was nothing like that (that a notion of family was missing in factory work). While we were talking, we realized that we don't have anything in this company...I mean, talk about having a *stake* (my emphasis) in the company and we'd be all right. The time had come to strike, we all together, planned and gathered around. [Personal Correspondence, June 1, 2013].

Ateeb Masterji was quick to dismiss the Kalra version of the strike. Rather than the strike being an outcome of a curse, or a failure of how the factory "family" functioned, it was for him and the other Masterjis a manifestation of inequality. The feeling of having "nothing" ("not even a stake") in the company had been identified as a simmering problem. In emphasizing this, he also shared that while the factory had never suffered a serious disaster, there was a mild fire last year that put the lives of several workers in danger.¹³² Further, Ateeb Masterji suggested that the collective decision to rejoin work—or what for the Kalras was a "solution"—had little to do with Rishabh's appeal to consider the Masterjis "like family." Rather, Ateeb Masterji explained that after much

¹³² Factory fires are, unfortunately, quite a common phenomenon in South Asia. While none of the Masterjis or factory workers I spoke with mentioned this, during my fieldwork in 2013 a devastating fire burned down a factory in Bangladesh, taking the lives of approximately 1,000 workers. This factory was the production unit for gigantic Western fashion brands like Zara and The Gap.

negotiation, Aakash and his father had decided to give the employees on strike a ten percent raise and an annual bonus. Rishabh, who was the center of the Kalra narrative, was conspicuously missing from Ateeb Masterji's straightforward version of the negotiations.

While this was the general sentiment of Masterjis, it was also clear that the desire to have a stake in the company was still unfulfilled. When I asked Ateeb to clarify what amount of compensation, or what percentage of the company would count as a stake, he did not answer but brought up this word repeatedly in subsequent conversations. I suggest that the power of using business vocabulary is significant: it countered the language of fictive kinship imposed upon Masterjis by the owners. In interviews, my questions about the extent to which Masterjis felt the role of family or brotherly loyalty were quietly ignored.

Moreover, unlike Rishabh's story—or the representative Kalra version, which had a definitive end, for Ateeb and the other Masterjis, the story of the strike did not have finality. Most Masterjis continued to look for better opportunities and even approached me for some once I developed closer relationships with them. Thus, to capture the non-resolution of their strike, I term this narrative a *second strike*, borrowing from the language of baseball, in which a third strike would indicate something terminal. Moreover, this non-resolution created the feeling that the masters were in some sense always prepared to strike.

Overall, the two-strike story became one of the clearest ways to understand underlying divisions in the factory between Kalras and Masterjis, Baniyas and Muslims, workers and owners. However, the story of the strike and its “resolution,” also showed that, while the notion of family is imposed by the most powerful actors who seek to gain proximity with the less powerful, it ends up cementing the very divisions it seeks to blur. While Masterjis are constantly pacified by the benefits of being “like family” on everyday terms, they are ultimately rewarded by raises and bonuses, which emphasize their positions as employees, and not Kalras.

In a similar vein, Nguyen Tu (2010) argues that in the effort to “help out” with the demands of fashion production, Asian American families working in garment industries form strong fictive kinship structures, adopting the titles of “aunties” and “uncles” to signify proximity. This network, Nguyen Tu argues, “activates” Asian-Americanness as a “secret weapon” (284), and alters predicted forms of labor production. While to some extent this example suggests that “Muslimness” is akin to “Asian Americanness” as both are activated through a fictive kinship network, I differ from Than in my reading of this idea. I suggest that rather than “Muslimness” being an agency-giving characteristic like “Asian Americanness” that workers activate to “help each other out,” “Muslimness” is here cultivated by the Kalras in order to perceivably, divide their power. In other words, the activation of ethnicity and forms of identity that are invoked through strikes and resolutions further separate the categories of owner from worker, Bania from Muslim, and Kalra from employee.

Thus, conversations about the “other” strike story became a platform for masters to make their positions of difference clear to me. To once again counter the *bhaiya* (brother) identity, which was at the heart of the first strike story, Ansari master who many referred to as “the red bearded master”¹³³ told me: *“factories masters se hi shooro hothe hain. Hum har ek company ke CEO jaise ban jaate hain”* (It is the masters that begin factories. We become like the CEOs of companies). Similar to the term “stake,” CEO was another example of business or professional vocabulary that used to describe their importance in the Rishabh Kalra business.¹³⁴ In further explaining what it meant to be “like a CEO,” Ansari explained that they were the overseers of labor, the heads of production, and the figures to whom tailors and *karigars* were answerable. In other words, Masterjis were in charge of

¹³³ A reference to the bright henna color he used to dye his grey facial hair.

¹³⁴ Whenever I probed any of them to estimate how many Masterjis were in the business, they all came up with a scarce number, somewhere between eighty and a hundred.

the Muslim working team and often represented them, especially when asked questions by the all-female, predominantly Hindu Design Team.

However, underlying the different words that were conjured to describe the role of Masterjis in the factory was an implicit “background” that was synonymous with their titles. While it was never stated up front, I quickly learned that all Masterjis I interacted with across factories were young to middle-aged Muslim men who migrated to Delhi and shared what was called a common “background” of having worked with Hindu designers for several years. This “background” is what, moreover, the Kalra owners simply gloss as a “pattern,” but was necessary in deeming the Masterjis to be what Mira Mohsini (2010) calls, “*asli karigars*” (real craftsmen). As Mohsini explains, the perception that *karigars* are “asli” or “true” is grounded “an imagined authenticity,” particularly tied to their religious practices. However, “authenticity” for craftsmen was not pre-determined through religion but rather, “constantly and iteratively generated through a multitude of ways” (Mohsini 2010:53).¹³⁵

In the next section, I zero in on one particular relationship where I show how this “authentic background” becomes the means by which the Kalra claim to brotherhood, which ostensibly seeks to erase it, becomes established.

Ashar Bhai*

At thirty-three, Ashar was the youngest Masterji in the Kalra factory, and unanimously declared to have the most gifted hands in the factory. His official title was Draping Master, and his unmatched talent, which I learned about very early on in my research, was attributed to the uniqueness of each drape he worked on. The Kalras explained to me that his hand was what brought the “couture element” to Rishabh’s designs and allowed him to demand exorbitant prices for what

¹³⁵ Mohsini argues that the perception of Muslim craftsmen as “authentic” can be located in their exclusion from the broader narratives of the (Hindu) Indian nation-state.

was considered his bespoke work.¹³⁶ Many clients who came to Rishabh's studio for fittings (clothing trials) would demand to see Ashar and some would request that only he take their measurements.

On the production floor, there were some photographs of Ashar with Bollywood celebrities.

Rishabh never missed the opportunity to express the intimacy between him and Ashar explicitly to me. Rishabh described Ashar as his brother and the "heart" of his business. He encouraged me to watch Ashar closely in order to understand what he suggested was the "romance" that marked all Rishabh Kalra designs. He further revealed that his last fashion show that was based on the concept of twins was a tribute to their relationship. He showed me photographs featuring pairs of models in matching clothing, joined by fabric at the hip, walking perfectly in-sync down the ramp. As the show progressed, the space between them increased. Moreover, in private, Rishabh explained that while Ashar was the most talented man in the business, he also had to be the most closely managed Masterji because of the exceptionally "soft heart" he embodied. Rishabh explained that the degree of sensitivity that marked Ashar's character demanded a level of care and attention that only Rishabh could really understand.

Ashar's "soft heart" was managed and attended to in many ways. Receiving a monthly salary of Rs. 45,000 (without overtime),¹³⁷ Ashar was the highest paid employee at Rishabh Kalra, and one of the highest paid Masterjis in the industry. His salary was considerably more than many members of the Design Team and about twenty percent more than any of the Masterjis. Aside from this, special attention was given to him in other ways: he had the easiest and most frequent access to the Kalra private offices and the biggest desk on the production floor. Moreover, the observance of Muslim celebrations such as Eid as factory-wide holidays that all other employees enjoyed was owed to him. However, this intimacy that Ashar and the Kalras ostensibly shared was double-edged: I

¹³⁶ See Chapter Two for a lengthier discussion on this subject.

¹³⁷ During preparations for a major event like Couture Week, Ashar would make approximately Rs. 70,000 a month with overtime.

recorded multiple instances where Rishabh's demonstration of "care" also included pleading with Ashar to come into work, even if he had taken a day off well in advance. Rishabh would usually make these requests in a joking, overly dramatic voice, playing up the non-formality of his request and stressing their brotherhood. Each time, Ashar honored his request and later would explain to me that he had little choice in the matter.

Thanks in part to the value placed on Ashar, I had a hard time gaining close access to him. While I attempted to talk to him at length right from the beginning, he was always quick to greet me with the standard, English "hello" but never engaged in much conversation. However, an unexpected situation arose to change this formality. One afternoon, Ashar learned that his wife was very ill. There was a great degree of panic in the factory because Ashar had to return to his village. However, because it was summer, it was difficult to get train tickets on the spot. Knowing of my father's employment in the Indian government, Rishabh wondered if I could do anything to help the situation. After a few phone calls, I was able to get Ashar a confirmed ticket. This was a turning point in our relationship and in my research.

The next time I visited the factory, Ashar's attitude towards me changed dramatically. Upon entering his workspace and greeting him with the standard "hello," he demanded that I greet him in his "own language," or Urdu. I quickly acceded to his request, noting that for Masterjis, this language was necessary to establish proximity. From this point on, other employees saw me as someone who spent more time on the "Muslim floor," a decisive break from the Hindu-dominated spaces of the Design Team cubicles and Kalra offices.

Ashar's subsequent openness revealed another dimension to factory work and the Kalra business at large. While he was clearly grateful for what the factory had given him, he more often used the phrase *dimagh kharaab ho rakha hain* (head or mind being screwed up) to describe his

condition and the stressful demands of work. I noted that this phrase was very different than the “soft heart” that he was imagined to embody.

I suggest this opposition between the head and the heart that maps on to the difference between the way factory owners and Masterjis describe their positions is significant. Marsden (2007) notes that while the heart symbolizes truth in South Asia, by contrast, the *dimagh* or head/mind is highly volatile and can be vulnerable to *chalaaki* (cunningness). Thus, the Masterjis’ use of the explicit word *dimagh* is an interesting way in which they resisted a portrayal of their work as stable and unchanging.

To illustrate how his head or mind was being “screwed up” or what produced this condition, I recall a scene that defined this experience for Ashar. This was exemplary of how Ashar and others Masterjis would point to failures of organization or logistics to include me in their work. These failures ranged from electricity outages to the delayed arrival of fabrics. However, failures that made the *dimagh* particularly *kbraab* were issues that stalled work or made it impossible to continue production. Soon, I learned that failures that disturbed Masterjis most occurred when scissors were misplaced or lost, preventing them from being able to cut fabric, an act which only Masterjis can perform.¹³⁸ This is clearly reflected in the incident below:

I was following Anu up to the production floor for about the seventh time that day. Walking quickly, she apologized for her pace and hurriedly explained that she was very angry and had to settle something right away. Entering the production floor, she darted straight to Ashar’s table, demanding to know what happened to a piece (garment) that had been with him for two weeks. She addressed him in a reprimanding tone. Calmly waiting for her to finish her tirade as she struggled to be heard over the noisy cooler, Ashar replied with a curt answer: kenchi nabin mil rabe hain, Anu

¹³⁸ This is the reason why Masterjis often write their names on scissors. See image on next page.

Madame ji (I can't find my scissors, Anu Madam). Because I was standing behind him and observing this conversation, I could see that he was hiding the scissors behind his back.

Accha, kechi kho gaye toh pura kaam rukh vah deeya kya, Masterji? Aakash ke saamne yeh bolo ("So your scissors are missing and that's enough to stall the work, Masterji?") She continued, throwing him a few strong threats. Ashar did not reply and glanced at me to see if I had caught on. To Anu's shock, he started towards the door to indicate he was ready to go speak in front of the boss.

As he took a few more steps, we all realized that not only were the scissors in his hands behind his back but the piece Anu was inquiring about hung completely finished. Crisply dry-cleaned and ironed, it was on display in a coatrack a few feet away from them.

As soon as Anu caught on, all of us burst out laughing.

[Field Notes, May 24, 2013]

This incident, though quickly forgotten in a few hours, was powerful on many levels. Besides capturing the everyday drama that regularly infuses the production floor, it also pointed to the power Masterjis have over a “professional” system in which design team members attempt to monitor and record their productivity. Ashar’s ability to use not having his scissors as an excuse to stall work, which is a fairly resolvable problem, indicated his power outside of the given employee hierarchy. Moreover, his ability to talk back to Anu indicated both his authority as a man and as a Masterji, even though she occupied a higher-professional position. This was also complicated by the fact that while he earned more than her, she was from a “higher” class than him. It is also noteworthy that even as she exercised her authority, she never forfeited the *ji* (a suffix to communicate respect) when addressing Ashar.



A photograph I took of Rafiq Masterji's scissors, another respected Masterji who works at the factory.

As I got to know Ashar better, he regularly made me well aware of his frustrations. Contrary to the way in which the Kalras romanticized their relationship, he expressed fatigue. Sometimes in our conversations he would let his mind dreamily wander to what other professions he could have chosen and made it clear that his two sons would not follow in his path. *Woh karigar nabin baneyge* ("They will not be craftsmen"), he assured me several times.

In explaining his frustrations, Ashar explained how some of the inequalities in the factory seemed permanent. While he could talk back to someone like Anu, this was not an option when it came to the Kalras. Once, when I asked him to point out the differences between the designer and the Masterji, rather than speaking in terms of skill or talent, he told me that designers depended more on aspects that were decided from *janam*, or were skills that were at this point not acquirable such as *baath cheeth karna*. Moreover, attributing these skills to *pehele se* (the past), he hinted at how

they were cultivated through historical privilege, such as caste and class. He explained that they could not be leveled out.¹³⁹

One particular incident illustrated this sentiment. While I was sitting with Ashar at his workstation as he played with a new drape, Kriti came rushing up to him carrying *taareef* (a message of praise). She pulled up an e-mail from a Bollywood stylist on her phone. Addressed to Kriti, it read: “Ashar masters hands are magic!” He smiled calmly as she translated the stylist’s message, but did not ask for any further details. Instead, as soon as Kriti disappeared from sight, Ashar turned to me, as if expecting to answer some questions.

I proceeded to ask him about credit, the success of the piece, and the central role he played in creating it. He responded by again pointing out the differences between him and Rishabh, beginning with simple statements like, *Rishabh Bhaiya? Un ko English bolne aata hain.* (“Rishabh Bhaiya? He knows how to speak English”). This skill, along with others like *baat cheeth karna*, were again identified as differences decided from birth. To my question about whether he could one day become a designer—considering the amount of credit he received for designs—he responded by asking me to name any leading Muslim designers. We both knew this was a rhetorical question.

Furthermore, to emphasize that these differences persisted despite the language of brotherhood, he concluded our conversation with a joke, *thodi der rukh jayein, aur aap bhi bhaiya ban jayoge* (“Stay a while, and you too, will become a brother”). The humor in this joke resonated on multiple levels, most notably in the impossibility of his becoming “real family” being comparable to switching sexes.

While this conversation, like many others between us, was light-hearted, it re-emphasized Ashar’s main point that the rhetoric of brotherhood and family imposed upon Masterjis actually

¹³⁹ While Masterjis recognize these unbridgeable differences between themselves and designers, as we saw in Chapter Two, they do not actually wish to be called designers.

produces difference. Furthermore, his joke affirmed that the differences that emerge from the liberal language of kinship only further emphasize the power the Kalras have over their employees.



This photograph was taken on second floor of the Kalra factory. It features a group of his employees working on a piece.

Conclusion

In Chapter Two of Part One, “All About Work,” I argued that the meaning of “work” is twofold: it can refer to creative labor performed by the designer or manual, hand-crafted labor executed by the *karigar*. I suggest that above the immaterial labor of the designer, tactile and visible handcrafted “work” gives high-end garments their value. The history of Indian fashion that I outline in Chapter One explains why “work,” which represents the Indian craftsman rather than the ready-to-wear designer, is deemed valuable.

This chapter develops this argument. Here, I show how the desire for highly skilled labor by high-end clients (Chapter Two, Excerpt Two) empowers *karigars* and Masterjis to a certain degree.

However, I show how the predominantly Hindu owners of production find multiple and innovative ways to dilute the power Masterjis have. For example, I suggest that the trope of the family that the Kalras impose upon their Muslim Masterjis is a way in which the owners project their power as shared. However, as I have demonstrated, this call to kinship and brotherhood is not mutual. I show how Masterjis resist the liberal language of kinship in favor of “professionalism,” but nonetheless participate in a common and ongoing exclusion of female employees in the workplace. Thus, the fictive family becomes the premise for inequality to be marked and reproduced. As we see, while it allows men to reaffirm their bonds across caste groups, the hierarchies between men and women, and Baniyas and Non-Baniyas remain intact.

Following the process of production, I see this chapter as a counter-sample or a piece that is made after the first sample is completed. In production, the counter-sample typically addresses any design errors that occur in the original piece, and “counters” or corrects them. In the title of this chapter, I play with the word “counter” to suggest that the hegemonic production practices that establish value, which I discuss in Part One, are not complete truths; I present the voices of Masterjis and employees of a family business here, to counteract this dominant perspective.

In the next chapter, I show how a top Indian couturier who also belongs to a family business finds ways of subverting his own economic success. This is another kind of counter-action or a way to understand the nuances of success in Indian fashion. With this, I now move to “The Finishing,” or the last stage in the production process of a garment that always ends with the designer’s touch.

“It’s this constant class struggle... There is royalty. Then there is old money. Then there is new money trying to look like old money. Then there is new money. Then there is new money, and very, very new money. Then there is upper middle class, and middle class. And everybody wants to move upwards.” Sabyasachi Mukherjee, India’s highest retailing fashion designer [Interview for the Business of Fashion.com]

Chapter Four

The Finishing: Designer Dilemmas and the Logic of Madness

In my final weeks of fieldwork, I was given the opportunity to interview Latika Kapoor,* a pioneer of Indian fashion. While I had been introduced to her at several large industry gatherings and had shadowed a team of choreographers working with her, Mrs. Kapoor had not responded to my follow-up requests for a personal interview. Many established designers were concerned about this and warned me against submitting a dissertation about Indian fashion without including her perspective; meanwhile, some younger, less successful designers suggested that this was a “cool move.” Without taking sides, I kept trying to reach her, while feeling my difficulties revealed something about the industry. Fortunately, in November 2014, *Elle* magazine contacted me with an assignment to interview Mrs. Kapoor about her prêt-à-porter line. As soon as I agreed, I was swiftly put in touch with Kapoor’s press team and copied on a series of e-mails to arrange the meeting. A few days later, a late morning interview was confirmed at her farmhouse.¹⁴⁰ Arrangements were made for Arushi, *Elle’s* photographer, and me to travel together by taxi.

Mrs. Kapoor’s farmhouse sprawled multiple acres. From the security guard’s booth at the gated entrance to her house, Arushi and I admired the manicured gardens that spanned the property. I noticed a small group of gardeners dressed in grey uniforms resting under a leafy tree, seeking shade from the hot sun. Seconds later, large clay sculptures that were almost as tall as the house began to appear. They resembled voluptuous, tribal Indian goddesses. On entering the family mansion, an aged butler let us in and brought us cold glasses of water before taking orders for tea

¹⁴⁰ In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many of Delhi’s wealthiest citizens built private estates or farmhouses in Delhi’s suburbs. These properties are very expensive to maintain.

and coffee. While we waited for Latika to arrive, I noted the large, framed family photographs in the living room. Many of them featured the designer with her sons; in one, they looked very content paddling in their private swimming pool.

Mrs. Kapoor appeared twenty minutes later without an apology. Her face was carefully made-up; her eyelids lined with black pencil, and her lips finished with a glossy rose pink lipstick. “I recognize you from somewhere” she said, as she shook my hand. I reminded her that we had met a few times and thanked her (again) for letting me sit in her choreography team meeting. “Well, if I knew that you were anthropologizing the industry, I would’ve met you sooner,” she said with a smile. I refrained from mentioning that I had made my background in anthropology clear in my e-mails.

Mrs. Kapoor quickly relaxed. After making some small chitchat, she mentioned that it was “nice” to “not be talking to another journalist.” Following the task at hand, I began asking about her prêt-à-porter line, which she immediately credited to her son. “He is the real brain behind the new label,” she said proudly.¹⁴¹ Elaborating on its development, she spoke about the need to expand into the Indian mass-market and at the same time maintain her “passion” for, and “commitment” to, India’s craft and textile sector. “India is a very, very, special case for fashion,” she told me, explaining that it takes a long time to “change consumer mindsets” and actually have “an item like the LBD (Little Black Dress), which is so universal, be accepted as an off the rack item.”

Later in the interview, I returned to this point, asking her to elaborate on her perceptions of changing “mindsets.” Pausing to ask me whether I had gotten enough information to write about “the piece,” she eased into her large, leather chair. Once I had confirmed that I had, she moved seamlessly from speaking about her label to introspection about her journey as an Indian designer.

¹⁴¹ As per the European definition of a fashion house—or a business that must span at least two generations—Mrs. Kapoor’s empire arguably became India’s first fashion house when her son joined her. The lack of fashion houses in India have both to do with how young the industry is and that many designers (especially those who are gay, male) do not have children to pass the business on to.

It was understood that the rest of the conversation was off the record, but I took copious notes as she spoke. “See, I represent a time when culture and art was still important in Indian fashion,” she began. Rewinding to the 1970s, she mentioned how difficult it was to “actually go into remote villages to reach the Indian craftsmen” and maintain the “integrity” of her work. She mentioned a brief tenure living in Paris, and her passion for horse riding. Like the narratives of the “gang” (Chapter One), Mrs. Kapoor casually inserted anecdotes that signaled great amounts of cultural capital into her stories.

In contrast, she described the present “state of Indian fashion” as “quite morbid.” Citing a few designers by name, whom I will call Anita Dhingra* and Malini Rao,* she said: “All these designers who began springing up in the last decade or so are quite commercial. I feel sad about the new money and fashion we see all around us. See, they have no sense of what the fashion designer is supposed to do.” For her, the “morbid state” of Indian fashion arose from commerce taking over art, and designers with economic capital outnumbering and outselling those with cultural capital. “This young lot is just lacking in taste, I feel, taste and education...” She gave examples of designers who exemplified this trend, many of whom were my informants and graduates from the NIFT. However, she also added a few “exceptions,” including designer Manish Arora¹⁴² and Shivan Sharma,* both of whom I discuss in this chapter.

Madness: an in-between subject position

The interview with Mrs. Kapoor points to two binaries at work in Indian fashion: old money versus new money, and commerce versus art. These binaries distinguish designers like her, who made their names before liberalization, from everyone else. This reveals a paradox: the more that

¹⁴² Manish Arora is often noted as the exception in Indian fashion. In 2011, he became the first Indian designer to be hired by a French company as Creative Director. While Arora terminated this contract (for reasons that still remain unclear) he still divides his time between New Delhi and Paris.

Indian fashion has been professionalized and democratized (Chapter One), the greater power binary oppositions like old and new money, art and commerce, hold.

In light of this binary, old money or elite designers are perceived to possess both cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984). Designers who claim these labels see themselves as ideal representation of fashion designers because they are both artistically and commercially successful (McRobbie 2002). For example, Mrs. Kapoor described herself as “represent[ing] a time when culture was important.” I suggest ‘culture’ serves as a placeholder for cultural capital in the form of an elite education and cosmopolitan privilege. Meanwhile, designers who succeeded after liberalization (i.e. the vast majority of designers) are problematic for old money designers like Mrs. Kapoor. For her, these designers are “commercial,” “new money,” and lacking in taste. However, this was a two-way gaze: some designers who were described as “new money,” “commercial,” and “tasteless” also dismissed Mrs. Kapoor’s status. “When you are that rich, how difficult is it to be successful?” was how one younger designer put it. In other words, the binaries of old and new money, art and commerce were ubiquitous in the industry.

However, contrary to how iron-clad these categories seem, a group of designers effectively disrupt these binaries by embodying a subjectivity described as mad, subversive, or different.¹⁴³ While I initially read the word “mad” as synonymous with being wild or crazy,¹⁴⁴ I soon realized that the term did not imply disrespect. Instead, madness appeared to be an industry-specific label that was hard-earned, and justified unconventional behavior. In this chapter, I highlight “mad” behavior by designers who occupy this in-between subject position. As I show, mad designers are not old or new money, and they are perceived as both commercially successful and artistically inclined. Further, these out of place positions endow them with respect. This is similar to the way in which “mad”

¹⁴³ I use these interchangeably.

¹⁴⁴ Mad and crazy are synonymous in casual vernacular. However, in this particular context, they do not mean the same thing. While madness takes on a deeper meaning, which is closer to subversive or alternative, “crazy” continues to mean someone who is unstable, illogical and so on.

people were understood in the classical age, before modern clinical understandings changed the meaning of the term (Foucault 1988).

For example, the first time I met Manish Arora at a formal, sit-down dinner where most people discussed their exotic summer plans, I was taken aback by his behavior. He made jokes that mocked the destinations people used to highlight their status by, for example, saying he'd rather go to Bihar than to Geneva. He also pulled on the host's ear and danced in his seat while giving his speech. However, rather than threatening the important place he occupied at the table, these behaviors marked his privilege. Vidyun, one of the industry's top choreographers who had taken me to the dinner, saw my surprise and whispered that I would soon, "understand Manish's madness" (April 20, 2014).

However, not every behavior or every designer can pass as mad. For example, I noticed right away that being well known was a pre-condition. Over time, I began to carefully record when, how, and who was labeled mad. Moreover, to get a better sense of what grounded this term, I asked other industry actors who were not designers what it meant. For instance, Sumant Jayakrishan, India's top set designer, explained that there was "something self-destructive about the designer's madness" (Personal Correspondence, March 17th 2015), and referred to my informant Shivan Sharma's* "goth-like clothes," juxtaposed with his "bridal wear success," as evidence of a disjointed subjectivity that underlies madness. He suggested that "madness" came from "what one *had* to do" in the industry, but at the same time mentioned that, "what one *could* do about these decisions" was key. This logic emphasized that madness involved exercising agency by negotiating contradictory obligations. Through conversations like these, I understood that, more than a behavior, madness was a subject-position through which designers navigated impossible categories of old money versus new money and commercial versus artistic success.

To make this argument, I structure this chapter in three parts. I begin by locating the first binary, old versus new money, in the context of India's liberalization. I then show how madness allows certain designers to negotiate this binary. When mad designers claim to be "authentically middle class" or from a "good family background," for example, they distinguish themselves from designers who are marked as new money and old money, yet express shared characteristics with both groups. Further, I argue that this claim to an "old" middle class and non-elite past reveals ambivalence towards, rather than an outright criticism of, the effects of liberalization on the industry.

In Part Two, I unpack the second binary: art versus commerce. By following a top bridal wear designer named Shivan Sharma* during a three-day sale in Hong Kong, I show how, in his view, art and commerce are reified as separate realms. However, I examine how he uses a deep awareness of these divides to style himself as a mad designer. Specifically, I argue that by "pulling things off," he along with other designers act only partially interested in commercial success, which in turn garners them more artistic credibility. In this sense, while madness is a reaction to the accumulation of capital gain in Indian fashion, it troubles the idea that capitalism can encompass a worker's entire sense of worth. For example, Richard Sennet (1998) and others have explored the debilitating effects of capitalism upon workers. However, I suggest that short-term gain, which, for designers, is equated to a quick, "meaningless" sale, does not necessarily lead to personal corrosion. Instead, I suggest that such actions may be engines for new, alternative subjectivities that a particular cohort of contemporary Indian designers like Shivan, are carving out.

Finally, in Part Three, I illustrate the limits of a mad subjectivity. Here, I explore the work of Aftab Seth, whom the fashion community calls a "designer's designer." Aftab owns a smaller label that is considered artistic, tasteful, and experimental; fashion journalists have also called it India's first androgynous label. I analyze a moment from Aftab's show at Fashion Week which shows how

certain perceptions disqualify Aftab from making the cut as mad because he is unable to achieve commercial success. I suggest that Aftab’s case illuminates how madness has to be carefully managed and cannot be in excess.

Before I proceed with the ethnographic data, I illustrate the points I have made in the table below. The arrows in the chart indicate shared traits between supposedly distinct subject positions.

	“Old Money” Designers	Mad Designers	“New Money” Designers
When they became successful	Pre-liberalization (1970s/1980s)	Post liberalization (late 1990s/2000s) →	Post-liberalization (late 1990s, 2000s) ←
Training	Untrained/received <i>some</i> formal training	Formally trained →	Formally trained ← or from moneyed families.
Art versus commerce divide	Perceive themselves as embodying an ideal balance between art and commerce	Perceived as commercial → but privately or personally artistic	Perceived as commercial ← and also often self-identify as commercial
Economic capital/family background	From wealthy, high-class and high-caste families	Identify as belonging to an “old” middle class/do not see themselves as elite →	Do not see themselves as elite ←
Aesthetic sensibilities	Typically work with Indian textiles, handloom and craft	Often make embellished clothing or bridal wear →	Make embellished clothing or bridal wear ←
Critiques/how they are seen by others	“New money” and mad designers describe their work as safe, elitist and unchanging.	Described and self-identify as different, subversive or alternative.	The elite describe their clothes as “tacky” Mad designers often describe them as uninteresting.

		Both elite and new money designers describe them and their work as commercial, artistic, edgy, different or mad.	
Example	Latika Kapoor	Shivan Sharma	Anita

Part One

Old Money versus New Money: Class, Madness, and Liberalization

As William Mazarella (2003) has argued, liberalization and the “Indianization” of commodities fueled the growth of creative industries. Through the 1990s, jewelers, magazine editors, wedding planners, and fashion designers created a robust luxury market for 300 million Indians who were portrayed as eager to consume (Chadha 2006; Fernandes 2006; Varma 1998). The demand for luxury goods intensified in the next decade. The economy’s peak in 2007, with its highest-ever GDP growth at 9% (Joshi 1996), coincided with the formalization of Indian couture or bridal wear. In 2010, Delhi announced its first Couture Week¹⁴⁵ or what was publically stated to be “the biggest extravaganza of the decade with the best of all designers, sets, apparel and accessories coming together to showcase high fashion designing and dressmaking” (“Delhi Couture,” 2010). The Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI) advertised the process of selecting designers for this “extravaganza” as merit-based. However, many “old money” designers who were skeptical about the advertised meritocracy told me that all they needed to show at Delhi Couture Week was about ten lakhs or a good sponsor.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Subsequently, Bridal Week and Wedding Trousseau Week were also added to meet the growing demand for Indian luxury and couture.

¹⁴⁶ Many couture shows are sponsored by liquor companies or by jewelry brands. For the industry’s elite, this contributes to the degradation of the industry. According to a report released by the Ministry of Textiles, The Five Year Plan (2012-

Many designers viewed the proliferation of designers and the fashion “boom” in India as a direct result of NIFT and other fashion institutes ambivalently. As Rashmi Varma, a recently successful designer with a three year-old eponymous label, told me, “There are far too many people who call themselves fashion designers in India today. At every corner there is someone who says they are one” (Interview June 9, 2013). Rashmi’s statement alludes to both the mass production of designers and the commodification of design that characterizes the post-liberalization era. In particular, “old money” designers criticized those from tier-two and tier-three cities as representing “the nouveau riche.”

Adding to the anxiety was that the “nouveau riche” were becoming both the designers and consumers of luxury goods. For example, in her book *The Cult of Luxury Brand* (2006), Radha Chadha warns: “If the old money elite was a gentle gurgling, remote mountain stream, what is emerging is an imminent tidal wave...The highest number of luxury cars is not in Mumbai or Delhi, but in the Punjab town of Ludhiana (223-228).” Chadha dedicates a chapter to “India’s rural elite” who, she observes, are spending “their new clanking money on four thousand dollar luxury bags” (18) and quickly replacing “the upper crust of old money that discreetly shopped in London and New York for luxury goods” (229). Such representations attempted to re-draw class lines, which were otherwise becoming blurry through the proliferation of economic capital. As such, “old money” designers unintentionally replicated Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1973) argument that late capitalism invariably degrades previously “high art” forms into mass producing “low art” industries. They argued that the consumer boom of the 1990s commodified the Indian fashion designer, allowing previously elite producers to be conflated with thousands of young, new designers from diverse class and caste backgrounds. As an established, “old money” designer Rahul Thakar* explained:

17) envisages India’s export of textiles and clothing to be approximately US \$64.41 billion by the end of March 2017. This industry currently accounts for 4% of India’s total GDP and 12% of export income (Indian Textiles 2015)

NIFT graduates know how to work like machines but they have no innovation, no creativity, no imagination. Then, we have another lot who have Dad's money and who've never set foot into a pattern-making class, and then they go out and make lakhs on some eye-blinding¹⁴⁷ *lengha*. [Interview, May 2, 2013]

Many “old money” designers, who were themselves mostly untrained, also began devaluing a formal education in fashion design, which they saw as the root of this problem.

“Old money” designers like Latika Kapoor and Rahul Thakar also perceived “new money” designers as less authentic because they catered to—or themselves belonged to—an apparently tasteless class, and enjoyed much commercial success as a result. For example, an article in the *Business Standard* described the luxury market—“closely tied to weddings and other special occasions”—as immune to the effects of a recession, arguing that, “expansion in smaller cities will take the franchisee route through the ultra luxury segment and diffusion lines” (Garg 2011).

However, these representations caused many elite producers to emphasize that it was actually a *lack* of taste and cultural capital that was needed to achieve commercial success in the high fashion. “Old money” designers accused bridal-wear couturieres of giving in to the lowest hanging fruit or the most lucrative segment of the industry. This was often talked about through the language of “tackiness,” an aesthetic judgment closely linked to bridal wear. For example, as Nalini Kocchar,* an upper-middle-class designer and one of the industry's first fashion critics told me:

Look at Manish Malhotra. He makes Halloween costumes. He is just *so* tacky. But he is one of the highest selling designers in the industry today. See, his success is all based on connections. He knows all of Bollywood. So he can just throw on some bling¹⁴⁸ and it will sell.” [Interview, July 6, 2013]

¹⁴⁷ A reference to the amount of embroidery that typically marks wedding garments (See Chapter Two).

¹⁴⁸ See Chapter One for a discussion about “bling.”

Nalini's comment signaled a disconnect between hegemonic market tastes and her own more developed, personal aesthetic. Her use of the word "tacky" glossed Malhotra's intentions, skills, and talent that according to her, made him profitable *and* tasteless.¹⁴⁹

However, rather than see the perspectives of "new money" and "old money" designers as incommensurate, in this chapter I draw attention to designers who innovatively blur such divides. For example, one of my informants, Sanjay Garg,¹⁵⁰ expressed that there were certain designers (like him) who wanted to expose "the dark shadow cast by liberalization, even for those who reaped its direct benefits" (Personal Correspondence, July 2, 2013). Garg here referred to his rise from a relatively unknown NID graduate to one of the country's most popular textile designers, and incidentally a favorite of wealthy Delhi brides in the last five years. In our many conversations, Sanjay reminded me that unlike the industry's "elite designers," he came from a "simple middle-class family." When I asked him to explain what he meant, he described both privilege and limitations. For example, while he grew up in a large home outside of Jaipur and his father was a successful professional, he did not have enough money to send Sanjay to study abroad. In the industry, however, Sanjay was widely seen as having taste despite not being "old money." To emphasize his lack of economic capital, and reveal his position of difference, Sanjay joked that even now, when his work demands frequent international travel, he sometimes fears not being allowed on the plane.

Sanjay, like other designers who were labeled as subversive or different, shows camaraderie with the old-money elite who mourn the decline of the industry, *but* does not reject the idea that some collections need to be made purely for commercial success. However, while Sanjay blurs the

¹⁴⁹As Patricia Uberoi (2008) has similarly commented in her study of the business of wedding planning, for the elite, there is a perceived key difference between catering to people who simply want to consume and those who know how to consume. This divide becomes another way to talk about the discrepancy between those whom the elite perceive as having existing cultural capital versus those with newly inherited economic capital or who are actors from the "new-money classes."

¹⁵⁰ I introduced Garg in the introduction of this dissertation.

first binary of old and new money that distinguishes him as a “different” kind of producer,¹⁵¹ he is not immediately identified as mad. I suggest that this is because, while Sanjay blurs the old and new money binary, other designers disrupt both binaries of art and commerce and old and new money in the collective imagination of industry producers.

PART TWO:

Negotiating Art versus Commerce

During fieldwork, I accompanied Shivan to a three-day long trade show in Hong Kong. The following is an excerpt from my field notes:

*Shivan and I were running about twenty minutes behind schedule for our return flight from Hong Kong to Delhi. Right as we were about to leave Raja Luxe, a family-run store¹⁵² where Shivan was holding his exhibition, two middle-aged women wearing high heels, chunky diamond solitaire earrings, and Gucci handbags, came in. Their outfits were a sharp contrast to Shivan’s all-black, invisibly-branded attire of harem pants, chains, half-buzzed hair, and dagger earrings. Like the vast majority of the clients we had interacted with over the last three days, they were also looking for wedding clothes. Knowing that we had to leave for the airport, they apologized for coming in late, but proceeded to sit down, order coffee, and ask Shivan’s advice about what saris would “suit” them. Within a few minutes, they spent about 60,000 rupees (1000 USD) each, and continued looking for more clothes to buy. As they leisurely tried on multiple outfits, I got nervous, thinking we might miss our flight. Ignoring my panic, Shivan stated an apparent truism in the fashion world, which I had now heard him recite many times: **no matter to whom or how, a sale is a sale**. Realizing there was little I could do, I decided to wait and take notes as they interacted.*

Later, in the nauseating taxi to the airport, Shivan calculated the profit he made in Hong Kong (more than 25,000 USD in three days). Quite impressed, I asked whether he considered the trip successful. He thought a little and said that although he had reached his target figure, “All in all the trip was not really worth it.” He used terms such as “boring,” “expected,” “whatever,” and “necessary” to describe it and it seemed like he wanted to change topics

¹⁵¹ Sanjay also lives in a plush farmhouse, characteristic of “old” money designers like Kapoor.

¹⁵² Raja Luxe is owned by a Sindhi family based in Hong Kong.

as fast as possible. However, given that the trip had been lucrative, I pushed him to explain his apathy. Instead of answering my questions, Shivan began fantasizing about adopting a pet monkey, whom he would name Isabella Blow, and designing costumes for a “kind of mystical” movie. We never discussed the sale again, and I instead indulged him as he blasted music, chain smoked cigarettes, and childishly shouted out to people on the streets.

When we returned to Delhi a few days later, Jai—Shivan’s older brother and CEO of the company—called him in to his office to review the order sheet of sales in Hong Kong. Looking over the math, Jai determined: “HK was successful. We made good profits. It could become a very important market for us.” He circled a few figures on the page and I caught Shivan rolling his eyes. Knowing that I was watching him, Shivan proceeded to act like he was having an epileptic fit. Jai was not amused and pleaded with him to stop “acting crazy.”

[Field Notes, May 26, 2013]

Before leaving Delhi for the exhibition in Hong Kong, I spent an afternoon in Shivan’s studio and watched him sift through dozens of his garments while speculating what would sell at the tradeshow. As he and Gauri, his design assistant, filtered through racks of clothing, they concluded that the “Hong Kong crowd should be played safe... Basically, just take all the usual stuff—the stuff that we keep making again and again—that’s what they’ll want to see. They will just want to buy the top-end, cheesy commercial stuff,” Shivan said as he instructed Gauri (Field Notes, May 13, 2013). Within this discussion, Sindhi clients¹⁵³ were predicted to be the main buyers.

However, despite the success of the visit which was anticipated, a feeling of incompleteness and discontent still loomed afterwards. As I point out in the excerpt, Shivan’s brother Jai, whom Shivan first described to me as “nice but not very alternative,” validated the trip through quantifiable measures of success. In contrast, by acting “crazy” in the taxi, Shivan signaled a looming issue. For example, his evasion of my direct question hinted at having achieved economic success at the cost of something else. I read his apathetic response about the sales (“okay,” “whatever”) as giving in to

¹⁵³ This high-caste ethnic group was often stereotyped as moneyed but only interested in purchasing luxury objects that showed their status and wealth.

commercial success, but not entirely. Moreover, invoking seemingly unrelated subjects and behavior signaled some degree of agency, even if fantastical. I suggest these actions inform why Shivan is labeled as a “mad” designer. To unpack this idea further, I share below some information about Shivan’s personal background that shapes his ability to both disrupt these binaries and claim this subjectivity.

Shivan was born in 1979 in West Delhi to an upper-middle-class Marwari¹⁵⁴ family. I had the opportunity to meet his parents and siblings at several of his fashion shows. Shivan’s father is college-educated and was described by his sons as a relaxed, self-made man with a casual work ethic; he was rumored to never arrive at his own office before 11 AM. His mother was a housewife who did not attend college. While Shivan described his family as “richer than most around him” thanks to the family business, like Sanjay, he emphasized that they never enjoyed excessive wealth. For example, he recollected how his entire family slept in a single, cramped room to save on air-conditioning bills during the summer. “We used to stay up all night talking and laughing because it was actually too cramped to sleep,” he reminisced (Personal Correspondence, November 9, 2013). However, with “hard work and savings,” the situation changed. In 2000, Shivan became the first member in his family to study at a famous university in London. He reminded me that it “wasn’t easy” to persuade his father to let him study fashion.¹⁵⁵ He did very well in his fashion course and subsequently interned with two top global fashion houses in Istanbul and London respectively. On returning to India, Shivan made a huge splash as the edgiest designer in Delhi.

Shivan made it big in the mid-2000s when the Indian fashion industry was booming. He showcased his first solo collection at Delhi Fashion Week in 2006, and from 2008 onwards, he was consistently reported to be one of India’s most important designers, often featuring in the top seven

¹⁵⁴ Since the 1950s, the Marwaris—an ethnic community originally from Rajasthan—have dominated India’s private industries, emerging as the establishers of its most prominent business houses.

¹⁵⁵ As I discussed in Chapter One, this was a sentiment that designers with high cultural capital in the late 1980s also felt.

of any industry ranking. Initially known for his risqué Western wear, alternative silhouettes, and gothic inspirations, Shivan was celebrated for being an Indian designer with international appeal. *Vogue India* named him the *l'enfant terrible* of Indian fashion, equating him to the British designer Alexander McQueen. His earliest clients told me his first collections were “dark,” “exciting,” and “fresh,” particularly in a market that valued only highly ornamental bridal garments.

Today, ten years after starting his own brand, Shivan continues to enjoy greater and greater success, and is now a multi-crore couturier with several factories, some of which he has never stepped foot in. However, this success has come as a result of a major shift in his aesthetic; he describes this as “having to do more Indian” a tongue-in-cheek phrase with sexual connotations.¹⁵⁶ In 2010, Shivan began making Indian couture and heavily embellished bridal wear in order to cater to the perceived “new money” consumer. He told me: “I had to let go of my qualms and sell, sell, sell. I realized there was this whole market of non-English speaking aunties who were saying, ‘Shivan just make me look cool.’ So, I had to go commercial” (Personal Correspondence, September 2, 2013). He described “non-English speaking aunties” as “new money” consumers who had the financial prowess and the desire to look “cool,” even though they lacked cultural capital.

This shift was highly rewarding for Shivan and his family. Popular fashion magazines renamed him “India’s youngest couturier.” Products from his eponymous brand¹⁵⁷ began regularly featuring on the covers of *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *Stardust*,¹⁵⁸ and famous Bollywood actresses began calling him for custom-made clothing. Today, his spacious store at the luxurious Emporio Mall in New Delhi is next to global luxury houses like Roberto Cavalli, Gucci, and Prada. The store’s rent—approximately 12 lakhs or 22,000 USD per month—is consistently met through sales of bridal wear,

¹⁵⁶ I thank Dr. Sherry Ortner for the observation that there is a connection between madness and being gay. However, this is not a link I am able to fully explore here.

¹⁵⁷ I suggest that because of the continuing importance of caste and class, most brand names in India continue to be eponymous labels because last names reflect status.

¹⁵⁸ *Stardust* is India’s most widely circulated English magazine. Its prime focus is on the lives of Bollywood celebrities.

which begin at about four thousand dollars. His most recent global successes include creations worn by Britney Spears and Lady Gaga's stylist ordering a similar outfit.

However, despite economic success, Shivan regularly subverted the image of himself as a commercially successful Indian designer. For him, catering to the “modern, beautiful, Indian bride,” equated with earning his “bread and butter,” often became exhausting. Thus, following profitable sales such as the one in Hong Kong, I noticed that he would often act out or perform a kind of behavior that others termed “mad” or “different.”

During fieldwork, I shadowed Shivan as he navigated his factory, office, store, home, and various social events to better understand this behavior. I noted that Shivan often used the phrase “I am just managing,” while working. “Managing” had a double meaning: it was associated with supervising production, but also indicated the feeling of barely staying afloat. In other words, it was a way for Shivan to describe his loss of artistic freedom. Instead of sketching and inspiration seeking—which Shivan insisted were the reasons he became a designer—accounting, billing, and taking care of “labor” was what filled a designer's time.¹⁵⁹

Moreover, other social obligations which Shivan told me he “had to” fulfill also produced a discrepancy between the understanding of himself as “artistic” vis-à-vis his “commercial” clients. Successful designers like Shivan have hectic social calendars. During fashion season,¹⁶⁰ which spans half the year, Shivan is invited to a show, art opening, birthday, cocktail party, or brand release party at least four days a week. He considers many of these events obligations, but finds them important to build connections with Delhi's elite. However, rather than going to these events solely to network, Shivan also uses them to carefully distinguish himself as different or mad: “My parents are like, from an old middle class,” he once told a fellow designer at a party, after he noted that Shivan

¹⁵⁹ As I have argued in Chapter two and three, this reality is what makes the designer's creativity quite secondary to the couture production process.

¹⁶⁰ In India, fashion season is roughly between July and December, and most of the city's biggest parties and weddings take place during this time.

and his clients drove the same luxury car (Personal Correspondence, February 14, 2013). Similarly, Shivan made links between his “artistic stuff” and his past and contrasted this with his contemporary “commercial” work. One Sunday at his house, he showed me his graduate student collection from his college in London that was catalogued and kept away in a beautiful album. These “artistic” clothes, which were inspired by his interest in tribal Indian jewelry, were never displayed in his retail spaces or sold to his “commercial” clients. “They wouldn’t understand them,” he assured me. “They” were “new money” consumers with a desire for “tacky” rather than artistic garments. However, a key element here was that, unlike Mrs. Kapoor or Sanjay Garg, Shivan actually created garments he himself deemed “commercial.” These were often equated to his “very Indian, couture pieces.”

Pulling Things Off

When designers like Shivan successfully negotiate art and commerce, the actions that determine this success are considered “pulled off” by other designers. Designers used this language to judge the outcome of anything unconventional, ranging from a show to a haircut. For example, when I spoke to designer Namrita Joshipura, a close friend of Shivan’s, about his decision to continue making wedding wear despite his own desires, she said: “Shivan can pull off large commercial stunts” (Personal Correspondence, March 13, 2013).

I suggest that to negotiate art and commerce by pulling something off is to communicate a discrepancy between commercial actions and private selves. “Pulling off” indicates not only what had been done, but *how* it had been done. For example, when I first congratulated Manish Arora after his show, he hastily accepted my compliment and responded that he had just about “pulled it off.”¹⁶¹ This followed with a conversation about how he only began designing the collection two

¹⁶¹ To judge the everyday decisions of actors as things that are either “pulled off” or “not pulled off” is a particularly interesting binary in this specific context. I suggest that it touches upon an interesting contradiction in an industry where *putting on* things—like clothes, attitudes, and a smiling face—are seen as necessary ingredients to commercial success.

weeks before people began to RSVP, and didn't have the right shoes for the models until the last minute (Personal Correspondence, March 19th 2013). While for many producers, these decisions represented the antithesis to a commercially sound decision, in Shivan's words, they showed how "Manish was a nice, chilled out guy who *also* [my emphasis] just has to make certain kinds of clothes to satisfy the market" (Personal Correspondence, March 13, 2013). I understood that Arora and Sharma not only shared an understanding of what both "had to do," but also that what they "did" was removed from what their "real" or "true" identities are.

Moreover, as Manish's quote indicates, pulling off something also invoked the feeling of doing something last minute, and without too much effort, a behavior that is stereotyped as typically Indian. For example, during the run-up to the 2010 Commonwealth Games, the question of whether "India could pull off" the grand event was everywhere ("Can India," 2010). In these accounts, "pulling off" meant executing a great show while concealing underlying problems like unfinished roads and a lack of preparedness. Similarly, mad designers regularly used this language to negotiate moments when, for example, they made lucrative clothes they privately considered tacky, or put on large-scale, but last minute shows. I suggest the language of pulling off plays up an air of unpreparedness but also emphasizes a sense of innate ability or skill. Most importantly, however, it suggests that designers are not willing to sacrifice everything for commercial success. Thus, pulling off identifies designers who are madly successful and successfully mad at the same time.

PART THREE

Aftab Seth: The Limits of Madness*

While madness allows designers to disrupt binaries that organize the industry, this subjectivity has to be carried out in precise ways. In this section, I explore how this discourse

However, whereas an attitude or a pair of jeans could be put on, this phrase does not necessarily indicate a successful completion of an act in the way that pulling off does. Rather, the statement "he or she is rather put on" colloquially means that someone is not genuine and one can see through his or her pretense.

affected Aftab Seth, a designer whom mad producers described as “too mad,” a phrase that indicates a limit to this subjectivity. Generally, Aftab was described as a “designer’s designer,” with highly developed taste. His aesthetic sensibility was seen as resulting from his cultural and economic capital; at informal gatherings people spoke about his family’s landed, rural wealth in Bareilly and his “aristocratic grandparents.” Aftab’s privileged background had also allowed him to casually dabble in fashion as a college student while working in his mother’s export business. Broadly speaking, Aftab was considered to be from an “old money” family, but because he started his label in the late 1990s, he was clubbed with designers who came up post-liberalization. However, unlike Shivan or Manish, Aftab’s family has been a part of South Delhi’s cultural elite.

Many designers including Shivan spoke nostalgically about the strong friendship they shared with Aftab until he found him becoming “just *too mad* [my emphasis]. No one could deal with him any longer” (Field Notes, March 12, 2013). When I heard other designers echo this perspective, I probed them further to ask what they meant by “too mad.” They offered different explanations, from “Aftab does too many drugs,” “he is socially flaky,” and “couldn’t show at fashion weeks consistently.” Moreover, I became interested in why designers did not attend his show despite speaking well of his work. For example, even though Shivan had suggested we go together, he later admitted that he wasn’t serious and “had lost interest in Aftab a long time ago” (Personal Correspondence, March 21st 2013).

However, because these representations were also used to describe designers like Manish and Shivan, I decided get to know Aftab myself. Despite my persistence, however, Aftab did not respond to any of my e-mails or text messages. As I noted in the introduction of this dissertation, this was often my experience with older, very successful designers.

I finally met Aftab in March 2013, following his show at Delhi Fashion Week. I now present a moment from his show, which suggests how the perception that a designer is publically “artistic”

conjures associations with class background. These associations make designers like Aftab unfit for madness.

About halfway through Aftab's carefully paced show, one of his male models stepped out in a full-length, white cotton skirt. The model took small, confident, choreographed strides that were felt deeply in the stadium room. At this point, the music turned minimal and the lights dimmed. After the show, people described this moment as when "something happened." Visually, "something" referred to the audience's open mouth expressions, wary applause, audible sighs of relief, raised eyebrows, and quiet cheer. When the entire collection had been shown and the models lined up in the standard V-like formation, Vidyun—the choreographer—announced Aftab's name. Unlike any show I've watched, in which the designer (at least) takes a bow, Aftab only waved his hand from the edge of the curtain a few times after Vidyun announced his name. No one saw his face.¹⁶²

After the show, I spoke with Nidha—a costume designer seated in the first row. She excitedly told me: "That was art. Aftab's show was art. It really was art. Okay, basically, he is a genius and all of the designers should have been here. Just to see the concept. Aftab has amazing taste and he just gets it." I asked her about the male model's skirt. She seemed in a hurry to end our interview but quickly stated: "It seemed cool but off."

On the last day of Fashion Week, curious about Aftab and the skirt, I stopped by his stall, which, to my surprise, was empty. Upon entering, I found the skirt staring straight at me, virtually untouched. I asked the store assistant whether anyone had taken an order on it. Meanwhile, the noise from Manish Malhotra's stall—who for many epitomizes a "tacky," new money, bridal wear designer—made it impossible for us to continue our conversation.

[Field Notes, March 19, 2013]

Ironically, despite receiving acclaim, Aftab's show ended up being a small, possibly forgettable, moment in Fashion Week that season. However, these moments are ethnographically important for revealing the unconscious perceptions industry actors had about each other. While Aftab's collection was applauded, it was afterwards seen as "art" and representative of "good taste,"

¹⁶² The Belgian designer Maison Margiela is also known for being a mystery designer who never shows his face.

rather than commercial fashion. According to some designers, this partially had to do with the price of his clothes.¹⁶³ Others implied that his work did not successfully negotiate the commerce versus art divide. That the skirt was received as “cool, but off,” for example, credited Aftab’s artistic execution, but at the same time, diminished it. When I recounted this incident to Shivan, his take was that the skirt would have disrupted the art versus commerce binary *only* if Aftab had made other pieces that were commercially viable. Thus, the gasps and reluctant applause that this skirt invoked during the show suggested not Aftab’s successful navigation of art and commerce, but his refusal to adhere to commerce at all. In other words, Aftab was the *opposite* of a sell out; he was seen as being too different, subversive, and mad.

Months later, when Aftab and I finally had the chance to discuss his show, he seemed well aware of which side of the art commerce divide he lay on. As he put it: “I am tired of being surrounded by people who are just the biggest sell outs” (Interview, August 13, 2013). Without naming names, he linked commercial success with a lack of authenticity, a description that also defines “selling out” in other creative contexts. For example, in her discussion of the commercialization of aboriginal art, Kimberly Christen (2006) argues that “the line between selling culture and selling out is strategic and under review” (435). However, Christen broadly understands “selling out” to be a conscious loss of authenticity; it marks a process in which aboriginal artists “repackage some of their culture” to suit the tastes of non-indigenous audiences who may bring profit (435). I suggest this is how Aftab and other elites also used the term.

However, unlike Christen’s informants who understand “selling out” to define an artist’s identity, in the Indian fashion industry, “mad” designers saw themselves as retaining authenticity *in spite of* selling out (i.e. becoming commercially successful). While Aftab was deemed too artistic, others, like Shivan, erred on the side of too commercial. Both were left unsatisfied, albeit to

¹⁶³ A simple garment from Aftab’s collection, like a classic shirt, can cost about Rs. 8,000 rupees.

different degrees. Yet, because Shivan harnessed a “mad” subjectivity despite selling out, he was also able to keep his “artistic” side alive, even while giving in to commercial transactions. Yet, such strategic performances are not always easy, and are not always for everyone. In this sense, both cases illustrate the difficulties in negotiating the binaries that have historically organized the industry.

Conclusion

The title of this chapter—The Finishing—borrows from the language of garment production to identify a problem that emerges when garments are completed, but not to satisfaction. In this chapter, I have shown that there are two binaries that organize and categorize designers in the Indian fashion industry: 1) old versus new money and 2) art versus commerce. However, when certain designers are defined by these representations, something is felt to be lacking. In other words, there is a problem with “finishing.” I have shown that madness is an in-between subject position that allows them to disrupt these binaries and confronts this lack of satisfaction with either commercial or artistic success, or old versus new money labels. I have also shown that “mad” designers share some traits that are seen to make them fit for this position. They include: nostalgia for an “old” middle-class background—which is code for abundant cultural capital but limited economic wealth 2) The desire to actively look for something outside of “selling out” or commercial success to define themselves.

This chapter contributes to scholarship that has drawn on Bourdieu’s (1990) theories of cultural and economic capital. Over the years, scholars studying cultural industries have both used and critiqued these concepts (Emmison & Frow’s 1998; Ortner 2013; Taylor 2012). I suggest that Bourdieu’s terms are best utilized in this context *not* to determine who has cultural capital and to what degree, but rather, to understand why it is an important claim. For example, designers like Shivan and Manish mark cultural capital by marking a distance from the business of fashion in their

personal lives. This raises important questions about the representations of Indian fashion as a successful industry, which I have discussed elsewhere (Introduction and Chapter One).

Further, while old money designers imagine that cultural capital is related to “art,” and economic capital or “commerce” comes at the cost of it, these associations are complicated in the context of fashion, which is traditionally identified as the meeting point between commerce and art (Entwistle 2000; McRobbie 2002). While I take seriously the claims of certain designers that they are making “art,” I suggest that it’s worth exploring what they mean when they use this term, rather than assume such meanings are static, and their value is universal. For example, I have shown how being “artistic” or “innovative,” while once a marker of success, is no longer sufficient. Instead, madness—which represents a negotiation between art and commerce—proves that both must be represented in fashion. However, unlike the ideal elite designers hold up, in contemporary times this link only gains value when commerce trumps art, while cultural capital is valued over economic capital. While these negotiations are difficult, they are an important means of coping with impossible expectations.

“To win the race, one must know their place and one must know their time” Nonita Kalra, ex-editor of *Elle India*. [Personal Communication, December 8, 2013]

Chapter Five **The Shoot: Time and Space in Indian Fashion**

Introduction

The everyday language of Indian fashion editors, freelance fashion writers and designers is replete with the language of time and space. By articulating the flow of their lives and careers through the language of lags and rushes, speeds and hitting walls, limits, and fashion versus “other” time, they exemplify “kinematic subjects” (Schnapp 1999) who rely on motility, velocity, and spatial metaphors to understand themselves. Producers also use specific tempo-spatial metaphors to describe the Indian fashion industry. For example, publications are often accused of making designers “big” while they are still “small,” or success is only an effect of being “too big a fish for too little a pond;” in turn, metaphors like “burning out” are seen as reflected in cigarette smoking that is seemingly ubiquitous in the industry.

In this chapter, I show how this language indicates disillusionment with India’s liberalization reforms. This period that promised growth and opportunity for fashion producers through the 1990s and the turn of the millennium is now perceived to have created opportunities almost as fast as their limits (cf. Cole and Durham 2008; Chua 2014; Jeffrey 2010; Lukose 2009; Mazzarella 2003). I suggest that the metaphors, words, and phrases Indian fashion producers use link their lives and the nation. To make this point, I draw from scholars who follow Henri Lefebvre to understand how geographical entities like nation-states become seen as vertically organized, “encompassing,” and efficient (Gupta and Ferguson 2002). I suggest that Indian fashion producers are able to “conjure” (Tsing 2000b) their lives and work with meaning by primarily imagining and re-imagining themselves within “India” and as “Indians” (Anderson 1983). In particular, I borrow Anna Tsing’s notion of “projects,” which refer to “relatively coherent bundles of ideas and practices,” realized in particular

time and places (2000:347) to understand this language. For Tsing, “projects” counter the emphasis on “global flows” that assume even exchanges, and instead illuminate how the process of “scale making” produces concepts like the “regional” and “global” that are both uneven and taken for granted.

The concept of “projects” is useful to highlight the intensely personal experiences and local forms of power that emerge when Indian fashion producers encounter the global, either in the form of international orders, clients, or writing assignments. “Projects” help us see, for example, how India’s economic liberalization, which is credited for bringing global magazines to India, and elevating Indian journalists to the status of global fashion journalists, is sometimes expressed as an “incarcerating,” rather than a liberating experience (Gupta and Ferguson 2002).

However, while fashion producers often express their work or lives as limited by India, this is logic is also productive. I show how for example, it helps them make sense of certain hierarchies and difficulties they encounter in the workplace. For example, the language of rushes and hitting walls, or lags and crashes, reflect an actor’s position within a hierarchy, and further, the position of the local industry in the global network. Therefore, while the Indian nation is employed by actors across professional levels, and always imagined as different than the international or global, individuals conceive of it differently. I suggest this speaks to how “globalist projects and dreams”—such as international fashion journalism—perhaps “do not make the world in exactly the way they want” (Tsing 2000:330). Instead, by looking at global fashion as a “project” rather than a “flow,” we see both the “messiness and new possibilities” (347) that are produced by it.

The main questions I address in this chapter are: 1) What are the different temporal words and metaphors that constitute the projects of fashion editors, freelance writers, and fashion designers versus fashion “outsiders?” 2) What function do these narratives have in organizing

hierarchies among professionals? 3) How is the trope of the Indian nation used to make sense of the states of catching up, slowing down, and the politics of waiting and resisting?

The “Big” Arrival

Many fashion editors and designers recall that when *Vogue* launched at the grand Jaipur Palace in 2007, multiple private jets were hired to fly in the event’s VIP guests. This venture promised India’s “one million Vogue women” (Brook 2007) that they would no longer experience historical time lags where glossy international fashion magazines arrived a month late, and were sold at three times the price despite being coated in a thin layer of dust. With the arrival of *Vogue* and other international magazines, the industry was deemed recused from the “waiting room of history” where it was always in the process of “becoming” something not yet realized (Chakrabarty 2007). With this promise, the magazine advertised the Vogue Fashion Fund award¹⁶⁴ to bring “small” designers to the forefront; the goal was to compress the time designers usually had to navigate to become successful and minimize funding issues.

¹⁶⁴ This three-year-old annual contest allows twenty shortlisted designers to compete for a prize that includes a sponsored show at Fashion Week, extensive media coverage, a handsome cash reward that consists of many lakhs, and a chance to sell at Westside, a gigantic multi-retail store with several outlets across India. It also promises a yearlong mentorship with an industry professional.



Vogue India's first issue (Vogue 2007).

However, between 2012-4, when most publications turned seven or eight years old, maintaining the initial print goals became challenging. For example, while *Vogue* magazine initially set a target to print 50,000 copies monthly, industry insiders confess that sustaining even half this number is difficult. Moreover, the once prestigious Vogue Fashion Fund competition that promised huge rewards has lost credibility among Indian designers. It is now associated with a lack of delivery, and connection with international opportunities. Thus, in this larger climate of disappointment and unpredictability, I show how fashion producers invoke the nation-state to understand these “problems.” This was evident in the responses to an event that occurred in May 2014.

During fieldwork, the (still) prestigious publication *Vogue India* was considered to have committed a suicidal act by featuring a model wearing a swimsuit on their cover¹⁶⁵ that had already been featured on the cover of *Elle Magazine* a year before. Following this blunder, mainstream newspapers and magazines questioned the accuracy of the magazine's historical slogan, “Before it's

¹⁶⁵ To emphasize the international standard of *Vogue India*, celebrities and actresses who are chosen as cover girls are required to wear “western” clothing or at least, fusion garments (i.e a sari-gown). *Vogue India* is yet to see a cover in which an actress or celebrity is wearing a sari, or a garment that is clearly marked as “Indian.”

in fashion it's in Vogue.” A famous fashion journalist, Namrata Zakaria’s response in the *Indian Express*—a national English-language daily newspaper—was insightful. Seeing it as an “industry wide,” rather than a “Vogue India” problem, Zakaria stated: “Many fashion magazines in India *are here before their time* [my emphasis]. India’s greatly speculated and much toasted luxury boom didn’t happen... There is no accountability anywhere” (Zakaria 2014).¹⁶⁶ Several editors and designers responded, on and offline, generally concurring with Zakaria. For example, my notoriously media-shy informant Aneeth Arora, who won the Vogue Fashion Fund award, stated: “This is a wake up call to stop making people *big while they are small* [my emphasis].”

As reflected in this dialogue, tempo-spatial discrepancies are often used to make sense of the “problems” in contemporary Indian fashion. This is similar to how Theodore Bestor’s interlocutors use the term “coordination” to refer to the gap between the Tsujiki seafood production and the global demands of the market (in Miyazaki 2003:256). Here, the “problem” or disconnect that Zakaria and Arora identify is that either the industry has grown faster than the subject (the designer), or the (late) “arrival” of international fashion publications in India is still before its time. However, beyond being powerful critiques, I suggest that Zakaria and Arora’s narratives also reproduce their positions of power within the industry; the urge to slow things down or minimize “big” landmarks is not echoed in the language of the industry’s less powerful actors.

Moreover, while actors like Zakaria may see their language and experiences as fashion-specific, these metaphors resonate with creative producers across the globe, particularly in journalism (Bird 2010). For example, Andrew Ross (2004) has described the “no collar workplace,” which characterizes the flexible labor of creative industries in a similar way. As he describes the lives of these actors in this “New Economy,” Ross writes:

¹⁶⁶ See Chapter Four for more examples of temporal metaphors.

“The employees who work in the no collar workplace are in a job environment that constantly shifts under their feet and indeed, regularly melt into air. At the same time, this instability is thrilling” (2004:7).

In the same vein, Richard Sennett (1998) has also commented upon the trend of rising and burning out rapidly as applicable across these contexts. However, while the Indian fashion journalism industry is another example of the kind of workplace Ross and Sennett describe, rather than showing how these industries produce a singular subjectivity, I suggest that the way in which the exploitation of the “New Economy” (Ross 2004) is experienced is variable. Specifically, I am committed to understanding the lives of these producers as reflective of how personal experiences are shaped via local hierarchies within global networks (Tsing 2000). This is what Gupta and Ferguson (2002) describe as “encompassment,” or the process by which entities like the family become located in “ever widening series of circles”(2002:982) that extend to local communities, and eventually to nation-states.

Further, I borrow from Jocelyn Chua’s (2014) powerful ethnography on suicide in Kerala to show how producers understand encompassment variably, and how this difference produces hierarchies. For example, while Chua argues that falling victim to “excessive consumerism” and “ambition” are publically reported as the major causes of upper-middle-class suicides, Chua explains that her elite, upper-middle-class and upper-class informants have a different reasoning. Rather than seeing themselves in-sync with the pace of a post-liberalized state, their narratives are overwhelmingly marked by a discourse of distance and self-restraint. In particular, Chua finds that suicide becomes a way for elite actors to express nostalgia for an “older Kerala,” (to which they belong) and warn that “modern” Keralites whom they distance themselves from need to “slow down, wait and resist” the frenzied pace induced by India’s economic liberalization. In other words, for the elite, embodying a temporality that is distinct from the current state is possible.

While the data presented in this chapter also shows how the ability to maneuver time is linked to privilege and success, I show how to actually be able to wait, slow down, and resist is for most industry actors, antithetical to what it actually means to work in fashion. To claim membership in this industry at any level, experiencing temporal discrepancies that are imagined as both personal and Indian is a requirement; moreover, the narratives actors tell about themselves must reflect the turbulence of the last two decades in order to be valid.

Structure of this Chapter

This chapter is divided into three parts. In Part One, Free Time, I explore how time works for the freelance writer who is yet to experience “success.” Part of the data that informs this section comes from my own experience working as a freelance fashion journalist for *Vogue* and *Elle India*, which involved taking on small, commissioned writing assignments to help pay the bills. In contrast to the rushes and walls that mark a successful narrative in the industry, I show how for freelance writers, lags, crashes, and waiting are normalized. Furthermore, I explain how the “lag” that freelance writers report become justified through the trope of the Indian nation. While this is a framework that cuts across narratives in the industry, I argue that actors on the lowest level of the professional ladder experience it in a particular way that reproduces both their feelings of powerlessness and the industry hierarchy.

In the second section, Editorial Time, I unpack the narratives of India’s top fashion editors and reveal the meanings behind their temporal language. I show how these editors (who are all women) are entrenched in a complex relationship where time and experience shape their careers in unpredictable ways. The most experienced editors are those who have spent the longest in the industry; however, as I show, experience has an ambivalent relationship with value. Often, editors in their early forties were anxious that people with “no experience” were “catching up” and the industry was “moving very fast.” Their paradoxical positions of being highly experienced in a very

new industry¹⁶⁷ imbued their journeys with temporal and spatial metaphors of hitting walls or having nowhere to go. I point to how, like freelancers, editors also employ the nation to make sense of their positions, but here it serves as both a vehicle for growth and as a limit.

In the third and final section, *Designed Time*, I focus on Aneeth Arora, a close informant I have introduced. Contrary to other designers, I show how Aneeth's problems are carefully produced to maintain her practices as antithetical to the industry and fashion time. While Aneeth is notorious for exemplifying the "unprofessional" behavior Indian designers frequently told me their foreign buyers complain about, she is both a successful and powerful designer. In this section, I make sense of her apparently contradictory position by exploring a carefully crafted temporality or her "own" time. This concept is a complex reconfiguration of an imagined local temporality that significantly shapes her business practices. I conclude this section by arguing that exploring Aneeth's "problem," is a powerful way to question the meanings and limits of being an Indian fashion designer.

Free Time

This section is about the freelance journalist's notion of time. I call this notion "free time," to capture both the availability and uncertainty of compensation that it signals. From my first-hand experience working as a freelancer and the lives of other freelancers I was privy to, I can safely say that this is a very difficult and stressful job.

Typically, freelance writers are given very short deadlines and little information to complete important tasks. For example, for my first writing assignment, I was tasked with interviewing David Bailey, who, *Vogue's* Editor warned me, was "the world's most famous fashion photographer," only a few hours before the appointment was scheduled. This gave me very little time to conduct the "deep background research" I was advised to carry out. However, when I expressed my hesitation to a colleague from the *Vogue* team, I was dismissed and encouraged to "Be Smart, and Be *Vogue*," a

¹⁶⁷ Most of the editors, freelance writers, and designers who inform this chapter have been working in the industry for five to ten years.

phrase that seemed to be a way in which to remind me what the global fashion magazine was worth. Needless to say, the interview did not go off as well as I would have liked.

This experience allowed me to feel what many writers told me defined their work: a simultaneous sense of excitement and unpreparedness, as well as opportunity and fatality.¹⁶⁸ While sharing my disappointing experience with others, I learned that for almost all freelancers working in India, “spurts and crashes,” which is how they made sense of my experience, are fairly normal. Furthermore, these feelings were seen as produced by the opportunities of writing itself; I was often told that having no time to prepare for interviews or being let down was what writing for “big” magazines in India and “being Vogue” was all about.

However, while on many levels the experiences new writers report are clearly marked as failures, Sherry Ortner’s article on access in Hollywood (2010) demonstrates how gaining information in “secretive” cultural industries often depends on these difficult encounters. The embarrassment of waiting and being stood up can be understood as part of the larger problems embedded in “studying up” (Nader 1969) or gaining access to celebrities. While this is important in highlighting the global relevance of these specific narratives, I show how localizing issues and experiences (Tsing 2000) is how writers and designers often make sense of them, especially when they indicate failure.

For example, while discussing the “crashes” and failures of young writers like myself with other more senior journalists, many told me that these outcomes were normal. The overwhelming response that usually justified these failures was some version of this statement: “These things can only happen in India.” I noted for example, “these things” seemed to commonly refer to the “connections” or social capital (Bourdieu 1984) that many new writers use to land opportunities in

¹⁶⁸ By March 2015, I was no longer considered a “new” freelance fashion journalist, even though I had only published about seven articles. I was approached to interview the supermodel Yasmin Le Bon, I was given about three days to prepare and two weeks to write the piece. Even though I still found this inadequate, I realized that there was a little difference in treatment once I had perceivably moved up the ladder and was no longer considered “new.”

the first place.¹⁶⁹ While other “things” that were described did not always sound specific to this industry, what was being underscored as “Indian” were moments that pointed to a limit or a problem. Moreover, what was both “normal” and “Indian” mapped on to the understanding that international standards set for Indian fashion journalism had been implemented arbitrarily. For example, editors who commissioned my informants or myself to write would later complain to us that there was “no bar” for Indian fashion journalists.¹⁷⁰ This statement referred to both the standard of qualified fashion journalists available, as well as what they were expected to write about.¹⁷¹

However, when I reflected upon these reported failures in multiple conversations, there was a clear distinction between the responses I received from industry actors and “outsiders” who made sense of them. This emphasized how “failures” were produced to cement differences between an Indian fashion industry specific and other time, fashion insiders and outsiders. For fashion “insiders,” the crashes and burns of young writers were largely attributed to a lack of experience in a “fast-paced” and “new” India. Moreover, experienced producers usually advised that these “failures” would minimize with time. I read this as encouragement to stay committed to the industry, no matter how difficult.

The criticisms experienced and “inside” producers leveled at newcomers often extended to situations when my informants analyzed my role as an anthropologist studying Indian fashion. While most were quick to appreciate my intentions, many also suggested that my method and product

¹⁶⁹ Most freelancers described their early writing opportunities as made possible because of their “connections.” Many, including myself, knew a friend in a high editorial position and this was the basis upon which we were commissioned to write pieces.

¹⁷⁰ This was also a phrase used by Manish Arora to describe couture designers (see introduction)

¹⁷¹ A widely circulated article in *Elle Magazine*’s online blog took on this issue. In responding to popular novelist Chetan Bhagat’s remark that it was hypocritical for *Elle* to be showing support for a feminist video that had recently gone viral, the author responded sarcastically: “Only news magazines and real journalists who are authentic enough to not care how they look can take a feminist stance. The rest of us needn’t worry our pretty little heads about it. The grown-ups have got this” (“The Trouble,” 2015).

would be “lagging” behind the kinds of analyses “new” industries like fashion required. This reversed Johannes Fabian’s (1983) well-known critique of anthropology as a vehicle through which the “other” is constructed as a figure perpetually “behind” the anthropologist. Instead, my industry informants shared Hiro Miyazaki’s (2003) view that the social theorists’ “problem” of being perennially “behind” his or her subjects only grows more serious in the context of late capitalism, especially when we study “up” (Nader 1969).

On the other hand, non-industry actors who tried to understand the “failures” of new fashion writers were sympathetic. Their responses to mishaps were often met by the advice to “resist” or to “wait.” These suggestions were crafted along a discourse of self-restraint that propagated waiting as a way to suspend time in what Chua’s informants also described as a “fast-paced India” which needed “slowing down.” In their view, what was to be resisted was not just the offer to write for a prestigious magazine, or dress a particular celebrity, but rather, the desire for immediate gratification, which marks work practices in the age of late capitalism (Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991). Instead, their advice to wait or “bide time”(117) exemplified what Chua notes has become an elite-anchored, post-liberalization discourse. This logic rested on the premise that there was something moral about waiting in a frenzied post-liberalization India (Chua 2013; Jeffrey 2010). By accepting work and portraying oneself as “free,” there was an additional implication of being available for exploitation.

As many scholars have argued, the discourse of waiting and self-restraint represents a marked departure from classic notions of temporality, specifically in the context of post-colonialism. In Bourdieu’s (2000) argument that waiting is one of the ways in which power can most acutely be experienced, he assumes that who it is that is “made to wait” is the subject who is less privileged. However, rather than waiting as “an empty act”—or a period bereft of agency as it has traditionally been for the subaltern subject (Crapanzano 1985)—here, waiting was understood by non-industry

actors as a positive and an “opportunity for self-empowerment” (Chua 2014:128). Waiting and resisting was also a way in which anthropologist Craig Jeffrey found that privilege was marked among his “overly educated” unemployed subjects in Merut (Jeffrey 2010). However, in this industry, waiting had a distinct meaning. Here, the advice to wait or actually waiting was at odds with what industry actors defined as being *in* fashion. In other words, to be in fashion was to live a sense of unpredictable time. Feeling the danger of being out of fashion was perhaps the only way to indicate being in it.

The Immorality of Refusal, Industry Time and the Inevitable “Indian” Lag

While freelance writers and actors in the industry I spoke to saw the value of waiting and resisting, they were also easily able to locate this discourse as coming from the “outside,” or from non-fashion actors. I was told many times that in fashion, to not wait, not think and crash was in many ways what you were supposed to do.

On one occasion before a severely delayed fashion show, I stood encircled by a group of former and current freelance fashion writers who were discussing their experiences among themselves. As they passed a single cigarette between them, they talked about the collective obligation of “never saying no” even to “bad assignments” that set them up for failure. The symbolism behind their orchestrated turn-taking, timely drags, and intuitive sense to leave enough of the cigarette for the next person seemed to mirror their metaphor of indulging in something lethal collectively. Himani,* a regular freelance writer for *Vogue* magazine, paused to explain: “It’s the law of the land for the freelance writer. You’re a bad person if you say no, you’re not going to drop everything and do something right away, and you’re a good person if you don’t push too hard to be paid. And you can’t say no to anything. You always need the experience” (Field Notes, March 16 2014). She went on to speak about how her parents discouraged her from continuing her career as a

fashion journalist because they did not think it made use of her educational qualifications, namely her masters degree in International Relations.

Himani's statement emphasized the moral dimension of being an exploited freelancer and following a particular journey, even if imbued with fatality. I suggest that her sentiments were shaped by an industry-crafted temporality: There was something perceivably "good" about rushing to produce work—despite the possibility of a crash—and this was enhanced by the follow-up tolerance of a lag in payment. Anecdotally, I was often told that the ideal freelance writer was someone like Himani who both needed money but refused to ask for it. This juxtaposition referred to someone who was imagined to be moral and have cultural capital, but a limited amount of wealth.

Furthermore, while Himani was perhaps not aware of how her position was shaped via the global hierarchy of fashion journalism, from the limited knowledge I had, I knew that this was very much at work in shaping her experience. When my informant Priya Ghosh*, who spent three years working as a copywriter in the *Vogue* Mumbai office, wrote me an email two months after she left the job, she revealed how this played out:

Basically that entire office is under the New York office thumb. They know India is an important market but they never think Indian content is good enough...That's why there's always this *lag* [my emphasis]. We're part of this whole international fashion thing but not really...So when there's an opportunity to commission an important story we have to make a run for it, because there's little that we got. So, then we just take the first decent writer we can find...And as you know. the deadlines are always yesterday and everything is so disorganized...By the way, you may get paid three years later.^{172xx} P.¹⁷³ [Personal Communication, July 8 2013]

According to Priya, while India was deemed to be an important enough market to open a *Vogue* office, "content"—or the information about local brands and designers that was earmarked

¹⁷² Freelance writers like Himani are paid between Rs. 5 and Rs. 8 per word.

¹⁷³ 'xx' was her sign off, a symbol that denoted two kisses.

to fill the magazine pages—was seen as a perennial problem that did not match “outside” standards. As Zakaria’s article pointed out, this produced the perception that while *Vogue* had come to India, India was not capable of producing Vogue-worthy content. The perennial “lag” that Priya referred to was imagined as unbridgeable because it was rooted in geographical space and time. Being “under New York,” a metaphor that illustrates the “problem” of being in the Global South, was used to explain the local industry temporality where deadlines were always in the past, and payments usually unpredictable (Tsing 2000).

Moreover, as Priya confirms, the “Indian lag” that is globally constructed plays an important role in producing the professional hierarchy: To feel the nation as backward or slow is to be at the bottom of the rung. As I show in the next segment, while editors experience “rushes” and “hit walls,” their experiences are removed from the less intoxicating realities of freelance writers who embody both the least thrilling, and the most fatal journeys.

Editorial Time

The Hindi word *dada* is a masculine construction that loosely translates as “thug.” Dada refers to someone who uses power in a questionable way. Moreover, a dada is someone who indulges in *dada-giri*: a form of swagger, bullying, or thuggish behavior that intimidates others. The joke that Indian fashion editors are “dadas” rather than wearing Prada refers to the title of the Hollywood blockbuster *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), featuring the award-winning actress Meryl Streep. The “devil wears dada” was a joke that a group of designers collectively came up with to hint at the underserved power and privilege that makes India’s fashion editors who they are. Ironically, it also touched upon the remarkably thin bodies of most Indian editors who carry weight, and metaphorically “throw it around.” Another metaphor that was similar was that Indian fashion editors were “big fish in little ponds” who lived with the fear of others catching up. Together, both

linguistic plays pointed to a familiar “problem” of space and time, indicating that the object or subject had grown faster than their contexts.

India’s top fashion editors are a small group of women who are between their late twenties and early forties. In the last five to fifteen years, each had the massive responsibility of launching an Indian version of an international fashion publication. I got to know this coterie after jumping through many hoops, which seemed in themselves mechanisms to slow down someone who was trying to catch up.

While their trajectories were unique, in each of their reported journeys the turn of the millennium that marked the first fashion journalism “boom”¹⁷⁴ was viewed as a transcendence of the past. Through extensive interviews, each editor recalled the rushed interviews conducted by foreign editors who flew down to India for a few days in order to recruit them. Across their narratives, there was a heavy emphasis on becoming editors “very quickly” at the time of the magazine “boom” or the peak of the liberalization era. This took most of these women from being medium-salaried journalists to important international figures in a period many described as “overnight.” For example, a twenty-nine year old editor named Nina* told me:

It was literally like one day I was in my *Indian Express* cubicle running around to get a story, and the next day, I was being thrown these big ideas and big figures (about a lakh a month in salary without perks). Of course, I was excited, we all were. I was like, ‘wow! You mean I don’t have to wait a decade to become editor of this huge magazine?’ [Personal Correspondence, November 4, 2013]

In not having to “wait” anymore, the language of becoming a fashion editor reflected a shift from what Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2007) has called “history 2” or the “waiting room” of capital to “becoming capital” that Karl Marx conceived of as entirely separate. However, for editors this shift also almost immediately produced a foreshadowed sense of “hitting walls” and “already being past

¹⁷⁴ While *Elle India* is celebrating its 15th birthday next year, most of the other major fashion publications are between five and ten years old.

it” within “no time.” Nina also explained that unlike in the West, for most Indian journalists it does not take much time to get to the top. However, it is common industry knowledge that once you do, there is very little room in higher positions, and consequently, very little time to spend there.

Moreover, editors made sense of these rushes, which were then followed by impasses or blocks in two ways: a logic that pit what happens in India distinctly against what happens in the West, and the global (fashion) journalism shift from print to digital media. For example, one afternoon, Nonita—who was editor of *Elle* magazine for thirteen years—and Sunita,* the launch editor of *Harpers Bazaar*, spoke with me after a Google hangout session they initiated as a new venture to talk about Indian fashion online (Personal Communication, May 7, 2014). Reflecting on their positions as powerful authorities in “top places,” Sunita* said: “Experience in this young industry gets old very fast. People think we are past it. We are not in the West where people understand the timelessness of Anna Wintour. In India, we are forty and so we are old, and already hitting walls. So, now what? Wait for everyone else to catch up?” Corroborating Sunita’s point, both editors retreated to the trope of the nation to locate both what produced and limited their professional experience. However, in comparing themselves to Anna Wintour, who represented a sense of timelessness in their narratives, they also neglected mentioning that her reign as *Vogue* editor began in 1988.

The short lifespans of editors also shaped the imaginations of their junior colleagues. For example, making sense of her future trajectory, Pritika Sahai,* an Assistant Fashion Editor, told me: “There is no room to do anything after reaching their level in India,” perhaps anticipating her own promotion and subsequent career demise (Personal Correspondence, April 3, 2014). Pritika’s foresight that made sense of the editor’s “problem” of time exemplified what Bourdieu has called the “forthcoming” (2000) or the already present future against which she was positioning herself. Once again, experience was articulated as double-edged: it was what earned editors their positions

yet it was also what quickly created their limits. To explain to me how she ideally wished to “balance” her career, she said: “I wish I could spread out time, like butter or jam,” a metaphor that represented her desire to slow things down; it also emphasized time as a luxurious commodity in this cultural universe.

The second and related point that editors used to justify the experience of “hitting walls” was made sense of within a larger shift in the form of media, from print to digital. Because of this shift, many leading editors who publically supported social media privately revealed that they felt out of place. While trained in print journalism and historically encouraged to write about various subjects outside of fashion, they now felt their expertise was limited. Almost all the editors I spoke with saw this shift as directly playing an important part in “speeding” things up, and inverting the relationship between time, experience, and position in the industry. As one senior editor whom I call Karishma* told me: “I was there when the big investors decided to only hire people in their twenties. And within a little time these people with hardly any experience were become big editors. There was an urgent desire for youth (Personal Communication, May 6, 2014).

This “urgent desire” that accompanied the shift from print to digital media meant that journalists who wrote for these magazines needed to look as young as the people in them. To further explain this transition, Karishma suggested that young digital editors who “still had years to party hard, smoke their heads off and look cool,” were suddenly more valuable than the aging bodies of print magazine editors that, only at forty, were sarcastically imagined to be “crinkling like a wet magazine forgotten by the poolside.” In her metaphor-laden language, we see how once again cigarette smoking appears as a filter dividing those with experience from the people who think they “have time” but are rapidly burning through it. Moreover, she explained that young people were seen as more suited to churning out tweet-length content that met the imagined demands of fashion

readers. “Your witty statement about my shoes should be over by the time I take a drag of this cigarette,” Karishma half-joked while mocking what she considered the language of the digital age.

By the time I began writing this chapter, a few of the senior editors had quit their jobs at major magazines to become either retail advisors or social commentators. To borrow another smoking-produced, industry specific metaphor, it was rumored that these middle-aged editors had “burnt out,” a description Richard Sennett (1998) identifies as common in the post-industrial, capitalistic workplace. Their self-reflexive narratives encompassed the extremes of rushing and hitting walls, highs and lows. However, I suggest that even experiencing these extremes signified positions of power in the industry; in contrast to young freelancers, burning out still signified that there was something to burn in the first place.

Designed Time

In this section, I track the various ways that Aneeth Arora maneuvers received ideas of industry time. I argue that she does this in order to disassociate herself from what she imagines constitutes and is constitutive of the agency of an “Indian designer.” While Aneeth is perhaps as guilty of unpunctuality and unprofessionalism as other Indian designers in frequently missing big order deadlines and not following up to maintain the demands of international production, I suggest that she exercises agency by ensuring the production of these “problems.” For example, rather than enforcing tight restrictions on her employees to increase production and meet the demands of foreign buyers, she brands herself as a designer who produces garments through the “labor of love,” or what some fashion journalists describe as slow fashion.¹⁷⁵ While globally, this term has been used to describe sustainable fashion practices that are opposed to ready-to-wear fashion (Clark 2008), in Aneeth’s case, I suggest that this label has more to do with her pace of production in a more literal sense. Through the next three mini ethnographic excerpts, I show how this attempt to craft her

¹⁷⁵ The meaning of this term is still under debate in India, as many argue that Indian craft is actually the best example of “slow fashion.”

“own” temporality or follow what can be called her “inner duree” (Munn 1992) infuses her friendships, her production practices, and her fashion shows.

Arora’s Time has Come!

I first met Aneeth Arora in July 2012, soon after her label *pero*¹⁷⁶ had won the Vogue Fashion Fund Award. *Vogue* magazine commissioned me to interview her. To collect data for the piece, I was tasked with accompanying her to a *Vogue* fashion shoot where the editorial team planned to photograph her with her collection. Unfortunately, this turned out to be a fairly chaotic and unpleasant affair: the shoot started much later than the given time and the location was difficult to find. Aneeth’s restlessness was clear as she was made to wear makeup and pose uncomfortably. Thankfully, sensing my own dissatisfaction with the execution of the shoot, she requested we spend the evening together to “really talk.” In our lengthy chat that shifted from her work studio to her modest but comfortable apartment, she generously offered me her time. Beginning by describing the contest, she said:

I never expected to win. There were so many *big* designers. And, I don’t have this fashion business sense because I work with craftsmen. I’m a dressmaker, *not a fashion designer* [my emphasis]. I don’t follow seasons, I don’t follow trends. I make what I like to make, *on my own time*” [my emphasis].

[Field Notes, August 4 2012]

Through this response, Aneeth established herself as *not* a “fashion designer,” an identity that rested upon crafting a notion of temporality outside of the industry. She explained that she actively rejected trends and seasons that she equated with following a calendar dictated by the Global North. Instead, her identification as a “dressmaker” allowed her to produce fashion according to her own desires or time, rather than struggle to meet the nearly impossible temporal demands of international orders.

¹⁷⁶*pero* is a Rajasthani word meaning “to wear.” Aneeth gives full credit to a member of her domestic staff for naming her brand.

Though I initially highlighted this quote in my article for *Vogue* because I was amazed by Aneeth's desire to distance herself from fashion—and still win the contest—the published version appeared in the magazine without it. Instead, the magazine erased my language by glorifying what Aneeth would gain through her victory: “Arora’s time has come!” an anonymous editor concluded in the marked-up Microsoft Word document returned to me. The published text sought to re-establish Aneeth as a “fashion designer,” despite her own rejection of the label.



This photograph features a look by Aneeth Arora from her second show at Delhi Fashion Week. The theme of the show was the circus, which she told me was a play on the industry (Style Mile 2013).

A few months after the article was printed, I learned that an Italian couple based in Milan had contacted Aneeth. Reportedly, they were not in the fashion business but had fallen in love with her product and sold a floor of their home in order to invest in her label. The news spread quickly among Indian designers who tried to make sense of her promise in foreign markets. As her success

rapidly grew through this contract and others, I continued to track her work and attend her shows. In an *Elle* magazine feature that I cut out and kept in my files, Aneeth tried to make sense of her international success despite being from what she described as a “non-fashion background.” The writer quoted her talking about her Rajasthani “roots” and tolerance for delays (March 2013). I noted how Aneeth continued to craft herself as following a distinct, local notion of time even at the cost of coming off as unprofessional. Unlike most Indian designers who find ways to alleviate “unprofessional” production practices—or play them down for journalists—for Aneeth, it was her Indianness, and specifically, Rajasthaniness that she credited for her opportunities in Milan, an important global fashion capital in which many Indian designers aspire to show.

(Un)Professional Time and The Labor Of Love

A year after Aneeth had won the award, I began hearing different things about her that interrupted the previously steady praise. For example, in an interview with Celia Wang,* a foreign fashion merchandizer based in New Delhi and one of her greatest supporters, she underscored Aneeth’s “lack of time sense” as her “only” problem (Personal Correspondence, June 8, 2013). Citing a few different incidents, she suggested that if only Aneeth had responded to particular emails on time, or stuck to her meetings with clients, she’d be much “bigger” than she currently was. For Celia and many others, Aneeth’s sense of “time” was seen as the “problem” which could seriously jeopardize her career.

More confused than shocked by these judgments, I decided to contact Aneeth and request a visit to her studio. After a few attempts of trying to reach her, she finally agreed. She asked if I wanted to talk to her about the undelivered promises of the Vogue Fashion Fund award.¹⁷⁷

In Aneeth’s studio, I sometimes saw direct evidence of the problems Celia referred to, which once resulted in a large order to a foreign store being cancelled. Other times, I noted shipments

¹⁷⁷ Much of what was promised to Aneeth as the winner of this award is yet to be seen. She confessed that the Westside retailers were remarkably unprofessional, and the last installment of the monetary prize never came through.

being packed and sent over a month late. However, from observing other designers, I also knew that these problems were not unique, and could be identified as structural industry issues: across factories, materials needed for collections regularly arrived late, essential craftsmen quit without notice, and the designer had personal issues that caused delays.¹⁷⁸ However, despite these problems being fairly serious, Aneeth and her employees worked as if quite unaffected by them. Instead, they played them up to cultivate *pero* into a brand that was antithetical to the temporal demands of the industry.

For instance, one evening when her manager brought her the news of a possible order cancellation that could have amounted to an estimated 3,500 Euro profit, she told him: “It’s okay, these are the problems we will encounter if we want to stay small” (Field Notes, July 10 2013). Another time, she cancelled a client meeting spontaneously and suggested we go out for lunch instead. Through these incidents and many others I witnessed, I observed Aneeth attempted to normalize delays and allow for practices that created “unprofessional” work. I began to understand that her conscious effort at remaining “small” and “going slow” was dependent on maintaining these “problems.” These “problems” moreover, positioned her in contrast to a notion of local, industry-specific fashion time.

Moreover, Aneeth told me that it was these “problems” of unprofessionalism that caused her to think about how to personalize garments and remember the lost “feeling” which inspired her to first start making textiles. For example, to emphasize her “love” for the craft of dressmaking, she had begun hand-stitching a heart on to every *pero* garment that was packaged and sent off for sale. This was a symbol clients would discover either immediately or after a few wears, depending on where it was stitched. As she explained other techniques she had developed in order to “return” to

¹⁷⁸ By the end of 2014, Aneeth had hired her older brother as CEO of her brand. He was to take care of many of these issues. While I knew the family business model was something she was initially resisting, she explained that she had “no choice,” particularly because she was unmarried.

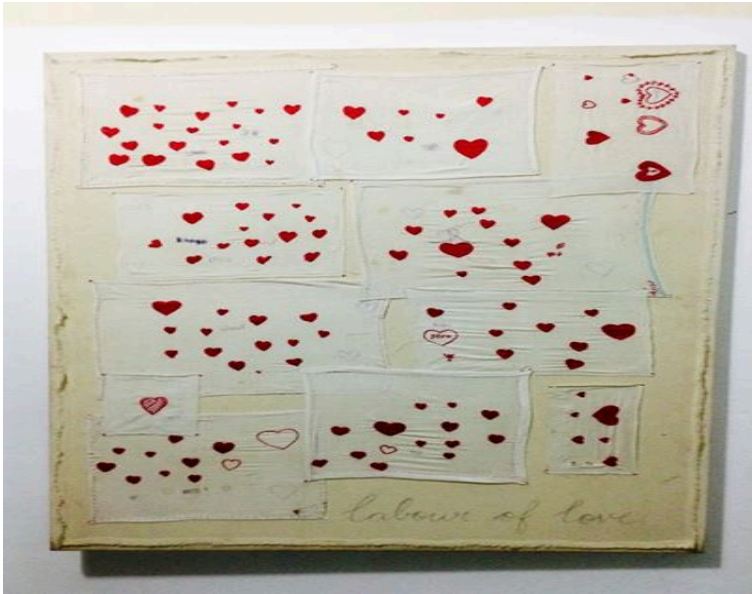
something “true and honest,” I sensed how deep and far-reaching her quest to find and re-find love in this industry was.

Aneeth’s effort at staying “small” and “slowing down” also actively shaped her work ethic and production practices. For example, compared to all the designers I observed, I can safely say that she considered her staff’s time off to be a priority. She told me: “Every single day, no matter what, they [the staff] get their half an hour to eat and half an hour to lie down. That is their time off” (Field Notes June 18, 2012). It only took me a few visits to realize how much her employees, particularly those who had worked in multiple factories, seemed to appreciate this, particularly because workers often report standing up to be the most stressful aspect of fashion production work.¹⁷⁹ On a few occasions, when I joined them for lunch, I was honored to be invited and participate in various discussions that ranged from politics to debates about the necessary ingredients in a recipe. These sessions clearly produced delays (as they extended much beyond the allocated lunchtime) and were very much part of Aneeth’s “problem.” However, in contrast to others designers, she actively maintained these “problems,” often participating in them herself.

Further, from speaking to many of her loyal fans who described both Aneeth and her brand as “loving”, I suggest *pero* created a literal and metaphorical “lovemark” (Roberts 2004) through several strategies including the hand-stitched heart.¹⁸⁰ According to advertising analyst Kevin Roberts, a “lovemark” points to a product’s ability to not only fuel desire, but tap in to the deep emotions of buyers.

¹⁷⁹ Standing up versus sitting down is one of the major ways in which tailors and craftsmen understand the difference between export fashion work and boutique work respectively. This maps on to the difference between working for a large, ready-to-wear line and a high fashion line.

¹⁸⁰ I thank Tereza Kuldova for this point. While she uses Roberts’ concept to discuss designer JJ Valaya’s aesthetic, I was interested in how the brand *pero* literally played with the notion of a “lovemark” through her brand mascot—the heart.



A bulletin board featuring hand-stitched hearts—each made by an individual employee—that hangs above Aneeth’s desk in her studio. Her brand philosophy, “labour of love” is hand-written in pencil on the bottom right

Show Time

In March 2014, I returned to Aneeth’s studio on a regular basis while she prepared for her upcoming show at Delhi Fashion Week. The staff was quick to greet me but had much less time to chat and engage in lengthy discussions. They said they were working on a “difficult” collection. I quickly understood that “difficult” translated to producing a winter-wear ensemble, featuring heavy coats, down jackets, and plush woolen capes. Working with heavier fabrics was something both they and Aneeth had little experience in. Still, while they reported greater demands on production, they assured me that their time off for lunch hour and tea remained consistent. Some also happily told me about a recent trip they had taken to Aneeth’s family home in Udaipur, which she had organized as an extension of her gratitude and friendship.

I was intrigued by Aneeth’s decision to show winter clothes, primarily because it was a rare site at the time of Delhi Fashion Week, when the weather outside was still typically warm. However, Aneeth had a well-reasoned logic to this. She explained:

I know that it may be stupid and expensive to show a real winter collection, especially in India. That is why the other designers don't do it...But, I don't want to conform to the local mindset; my Italian buyers might get it. You know showing winter even if its summer in India is how to actually stay ahead, even if it means staying small in the Indian market.

[Interview, March 3, 2014].

I understood Aneeth's decision to show winter wear, a "risky and expensive" decision, as part of her larger effort of producing contradictory temporalities. I suggest that by showing winter clothes and not following a "local mindset"—even at the risk of staying "small"—Aneeth was finding a way to "stay ahead." I read these temporal metaphors as codes that suggested how Aneeth was navigating the limits of the Indian market.

On the day of her fashion show (March 18, 2014), Aneeth further honed this temporal discrepancy. A few hours before the show, I shifted between backstage and the public fashion week venue, recording preparations and pinning tiny velvet hearts on the audience.¹⁸¹ Backstage, Aneeth instructed her makeup artists to coat her models' eyelashes in white mascara to resemble snowflakes and bring out the feeling of winter. Right before the show, Aneeth requested the air-conditioning be turned down to freezing levels so that the audience would make use of the handmade blanket-shawls left as gifts on their seats.

The show had a mythical, winter-like quality about it. However, it was hard to gauge whether it would be a commercial success, particularly because I heard many audience members around me comment about the strange juxtaposition of snow on the ramp and the scorching heat outside. However, when I discussed the show with Aneeth, she was pleased. As she predicted, media reports believed she was the only designer who had shown a winter collection in India that season.

¹⁸¹ Each season, Aneeth's form of distributing "love" changed. In an effort to help her, I participated in this activity several times; once, by painting tiny hearts on people's faces and another time, by distributing heart-shaped cookies to anyone who walked by. It only took one or two seasons for most people to know that the heart, even without the label name *pero* written on it, was from Arora's brand.

Moreover, her ensemble was well appreciated by certain international critics but instigated some degree of confusion in the Indian fashion press, which was partly her intention.

A week after the show she suggested we celebrate, and I happily agreed. I understood that her decision to not produce a very “big” or domestically marketable show continued to shape her narrative as a trajectory imbued with power; it represented her ability to distance herself from an imagined notion of Indian fashion industry time, and moreover, to resist the pressures of becoming “big” and moving “fast.”¹⁸²

Conclusion

This chapter has explored Anna Tsing’s concept of “projects,” which shows how intense local experiences are produced in large, global networks. By exploring the narratives of freelance or inexperienced writers, a group of editors, and a designer, I have shown how various actors with different amounts of power experience distinct “problems” of mobility, growth, and access that they frame through the language of space and time.

As I have shown, while the freelance writer is controlled by the unpredictability of the industry through hurries and lags, the experienced editor embodies rushing, followed by the feeling of having grown too fast, or hitting a wall. In an attempt to gain distance from these temporal extremes that produce and are reproduced by the industry, I show how the designer Aneeth Arora strives to create her “own” sense of time. I demonstrate how this immediately calls into question her relationship to fashion, or her self-identification as a designer.

Throughout this chapter, the nation has remained a consistent trope. However, rather than gloss all industry practices and experiences as Indian, which some of my informants often did, I have tried to show the nuanced ways in which the nation is imagined by industry actors who are marked with various amounts of power. I suggest these variations produce an unequal distribution

¹⁸² In 2014, Aneeth Arora is one of India’s few designers commissioned to do a piece for a major, international show on Indian fabrics and textiles. This will be exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2015-16.

of power: for freelance writers (or those at the “bottom”) being Indian produces a “lag,” while for editors, Indianness facilitates both opportunities and limits. Finally, for Aneeth, it is Indianness, which is typically equated to unprofessionalism, that she cultivates in order to create her “own” sense of time, or what she calls a “labor of love.”

Finally, the title of this chapter, “The Shoot” also marks the last stages of making a fashion collection. As I have indicated, this is the moment when products are transferred out of the hands of designers into the offices of editors, photographers, and stylists who must create captivating print and online features for consumers. In the flow of production, the time of the shoot is when the products are often retroactively analyzed; questions about their meaning and techniques are raised in order to determine their value. This literal stage mirrors the point of this chapter, which is to provide a retrospective look at the last two decades of Indian fashion. At the heart of this analysis, I argue, is an examination of the relationship between time and success, and the speed that controls it.

I now proceed to the conclusion of this dissertation, a section that I call “The Show.” The show is literally when the designer and his team present their work to the consumers of fashion, and is the point at which the garments have been finished, altered, photographed and catalogued. While the site of my conclusion is not an actual fashion show but an exclusive panel discussion about the state of Indian fashion, this moment, like a show, represents a classic example of interface ethnography (Ortner 2010). Here, the industry self-reflexively presents itself to the public, as it also ambivalently celebrates its achievements.

Conclusion

The Show



A photograph I took backstage at Fashion Week

In November 2014, OGAAN, one of New Delhi's first multi-brand, high-end fashion stores, celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. Invites from Kavita and Aashti Bhartia, the mother-daughter storeowners, went out to about three hundred people. The guest list included some of store's most loyal clients and the hundreds of designers its owners had promoted over the years.

In addition, a small group of about sixty people received a special invitation for a panel discussion the next day. A textile scholar and a close friend, Mayank Mansingh Kaul,¹⁸³ was in charge of organizing the exclusive event. He described its premise as a “living room kind of conversation,” featuring two designers who are well represented in this dissertation: David Abraham and Neelima Khanna.¹⁸⁴ While Mayank considered David a “predictable choice,” he expressed excitement to be in conversation with Neelima, who had just won a major competition. He revealed that Vogue’s Fashion Editor, Bandana Tewari, would be the surprise special guest.

On the day of the event, November 9, 2014, I settled down at a small table in the adjoining OGAAN café where the panel was hosted. Before the discussion began, I greeted many people in the audience whom I had come to know through fieldwork. Most of them were recognized designers, and others were owners of global retail empires like GOOD EARTH or FAB INDIA. Soon, Steve Dube,* Sonali Sharma,* and Kris Nguyen* joined me; they were the self-described “quieter designers” of the event, a description that alluded to their relatively small-scale, crafts-based studios. They were also all classmates from NIFT, and had graduated in the mid 1990s. This close circle that I was now made part of made me witness to some quieter talk once the panel discussion began. Meanwhile, Kavita and Aashti elegantly refilled their guests’ wine glasses.

Mayank began the discussion by declaring that the occasion of OGAAN’s 25th anniversary was a celebration of the industry itself. He jogged the audience’s memory, imagining it as collective. “OGAAN was *the* go-to place for rich, business family women who were looking for high quality clothing through the 1990s,” he began, dreamily. In order to contrast the “then” from the “now,” Mayank turned to Bandana, asking her to begin by “describing what *this* moment of Indian fashion was all about.” Without hesitation, she listed two points, counting them on her fingers: 1) the emphasis on Indian craft and textile as the USP (Unique Selling Point) of Indian fashion and 2) the

¹⁸³ Mayank was also an NID graduate, and a close friend of many of India’s first, old money designers.

¹⁸⁴ I discuss Neelima’s label Ice Four* extensively in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

“not trend driven” attitude of Indian designers. She explained the latter in greater detail: “Rather than following season colors, India designers do better when they are negotiating the paradoxes of India, such as rural, urban, rich, and poor.” This quickly led back to her first point that suggested that Indian designers were best off when they worked with craft and textile.

A lively discussion followed. Mayank called upon guests in the audience to speak up and respond to specific points that the panel made. Several important questions were raised, including how small designers could grow when most retailers only bought on consignment.¹⁸⁵ Politely accepting applause for her victory, Neelima Khanna responded that within the last two years she had found “a lot more support for Indian designers.” At my table, Kris joked to the group that she was being paid to make this statement. Sonali gave him a handshake under the table. They whispered about how much Neelima had tailored her work to fit the demands of the competition, referring to what they called her “sudden textilization.” The fact that she was only twenty-six also informed their idea that she did not actually have the experience to understand the meanings behind the textiles she was working with.

Within ten minutes, the conversation evolved to a discussion about craft and “saving” weavers; the pressing question became how India’s fashion and product producers could preserve textiles. When David Abraham made some very well articulated statements about the relationship between luxury and Indian craft, which I now knew was quite expected of him in these settings, a few people applauded. However, Mayank troubled this easy flow and stopped to point out the trend of the discussion to the audience. He asked rhetorically: “Can we even talk about Indian fashion without talking about craft any longer?”

¹⁸⁵ Consignment is a method of retail in which storeowners buy items from designers on a temporary basis. If the item sells, both the designer and the store make profit. If it does not, the item is returned to the designer; many designers told me that sometimes the garments come back in terrible condition. The norm of consignment also makes it much harder for middle-class designers to break in to the top designer bracket. Because of consignment, success becomes seen as only possible if you have a safety net (family funds or another source of income).

David responded, almost on cue, by raising a series of provocative questions: “*Why not* use craft if it the most practical thing to be doing in India? Other designers and most of the audience approved of his reasoning, and continued the dialogue. David’s phrase “why not” became the frame for a series of introspective questions that followed: *Why not* take advantage of all that we have around us? *Why not* go to the market and pick up a piece of textile and have it dyed, hand printed and re-dyed if we can? *Why not* be Indian and use all this labor if that is what makes the most sense? As I jotted down notes, I observed that the language of these questions had an undertone of defensiveness and triumph. Being Indian was framed as a chosen alternative, and also, a privilege. Moreover, being an Indian designer was, in many ways, reduced to using “the labor,” or the craftsmen who were imagined as readily available, around “us.” After taking a few more questions from the audience, almost all of which addressed the revival of craft and handloom, Mayanak raised a toast and thanked everyone for coming. Many people lingered long after the talk was over, and Kavita and Aasthi generously laid out an extravagant dinner.

Mayank called me the next morning. “People have not stopped calling me all morning!” he said, excitedly. Then his cheery note turned serious: “But did you notice the craziest thing? No one even said the name Sabyasachi. Not once was a Tarun¹⁸⁶ or a Gudda¹⁸⁷ mentioned.” I asked whether they had been invited. He confirmed that he had sent e-mails, but reminded me the event clashed with Ritu Kumar’s (the “mother” of Indian fashion’s) seventieth birthday; apparently, a small, exclusive dinner had been organized at her lavish estate. We talked at length, imagining what that night would have looked like and what these two nights, happening at the same time, meant for the industry. Mayank articulated it as a divide between the “old guard” and the “emerging talent,” with the event we attended representing the latter.

¹⁸⁶ Reference to Tarun Tahiliani.

¹⁸⁷ Nickname for top couturier, Rohit Bal. In her book *Powderoom: The Untold Story of Indian Fashion* (2012) Shefalee Vasudev calls Bal the most well-known Indian designer. To exemplify this, she recalls that when the designer had a heart attack, even uneducated, working-class Indians were concerned.

I was at the tail end of writing this dissertation at “this moment” in Indian fashion, a time that has clear continuities with the industry I studied. As I have shown, this is a climate in which being Indian, or championing textile and Indian craft was presented as *the* hegemonic paradigm in Indian fashion. However, this was also a moment that for many, including Mayank, was recognized as one when a new paradigm was “emerging.” Following my conversation with Mayank, I wrote down these questions in my fieldnotes: What was really “emerging” given that the discourse at OGAAN continued to be an elite-driven promotion of Indian craft channeled through the industry’s veterans and the “new” designers they celebrated? What was really “new” about a designer like Neelima turning to textile, and what was the group at my table actually snickering at? What was the difference between the “old school” craft-revivalist designers who were at Mrs. Kumar’s birthday and the designers at OGAAN, many of whom I knew, who self-identified as belonging to an “old” pre-liberalization middle class?

Through the last five chapters I have argued that the contemporary representation of Indian fashion as primarily a craft and textile-based industry caters to an elite, historical preference of craft over ready-to-wear fashion (Chapter One). While working closely with Indian craftsmen is now propagated as the logical, obvious, and good-for-all solution to the industry’s historical fashion problems, I have shown how this representation disempowers the figure of the ready-to-wear Indian fashion designer as a creative producer. I have also argued that the dominant turn to craft occludes the original narrative of Indian fashion as a ready-to-wear, export-based industry directed at India’s “new” middle-class producers. Thus, I suggest that the way Indian fashion has developed has been far from its original promise as an industry for middle-class Indians. At several points in this dissertation, however, I suggest that the rise of e-commerce as a new platform for India’s ready-to-wear fashion signals new hope.

Despite these renewed promises, I wish to highlight the explicit consequences in portraying Indian designers as “exceptional”—or not trend driven but devoted to Indian crafts. Given the elite interests in craft that were veiled during the practical institutionalization of ready-to-wear clothing as fashion in India, I contextualize this “moment” as a solution within the context of failure, as many of my middle and upper class informants perceive it. I have suggested that the “choices” Indian designers are making in the turn towards craft are neither new nor uncomplicated. Rather, for some designers they are an attempt to both appeal to the “real” interests of the elite and hold on to their own identification as “old” middle class producers with morality. Meanwhile, I suggest that for some elite producers, Indian couture is a crisis because it represents an inability to manage the project of ready-to-wear fashion as fashion for the middle class. In other words, for some elite producers, couture gave some of the “new” middle classes the ability to curate – and often “over” curate—the sacred crafts of India.

Moreover, I have shown how Bandana’s portrayal of this unanimous “moment” actually divides designers along many lines. Many successful designers in contemporary India works closely with Indian textile and craft and fit Bandana description. However, as I have shown, this representation of success neither goes unquestioned nor remains stagnant. For example, as Mayank pointed out in our private conversation, by 2014, there was not only a marked loss of interest in bridal wear designers—a phenomenon I personally observed in 2013—but actually a disregard for them. In contrast, a couple of years ago, bridal wear designers like Rohit Bal were considered the sole “saviors” of craftsmen, and by extension, the Indian fashion industry. Moreover, there was also skepticism around the idea that using Indian craft or textile was enough to signal a “good” class background, especially when it was “sudden.”

Still, as the OGAAN event illustrated, by the end of my project, public forums and fashion competitions that remained guided by elite interests were beginning to embrace self-described

“small,” “minimal” and “low key” designers who were positioning themselves in opposition to bridal wear designers, while sharing their interest in reviving craft. The length of my fieldwork then allowed me to witness what some would consider complete transformations; for example, Neelima went from being a self-described commercially unviable designer (Chapter 2) to one who now enjoys elite support and commercial profit. However, even the last moments of fieldwork left me wondering to what extent these transformations were complete or durable, and what underpinned these portrayals of the market as rapidly shifting.

In this forum, amongst many others, the industry showed support for Neelima’s “minimal, pared down design” which was, importantly, emphasized by her recent decision to begin using textile and craft. In response, she described her own work as “slow and self conscious fashion,” a category that is not associated with ready-to-wear or couture. For the audience, these descriptions positioned her as someone who both was not, and could not be only commercially successful. It was striking that few people in the audience (besides those at my table) knew that she came from West Delhi, a part of the city which most of the elite equate with a lack of cultural capital and taste. However, calling her out on her “sudden textilization” for some, hinted that Neelima was performing an interest in craft and textile to appeal to “old money” producers. However, despite this quiet contention, I left the field at this moment, when Neelima represented the new, ideal Indian designer for the elite: she worked with craft on a small scale, was considered minimal and pared down, and most importantly, she was perceived to lack interest in immediate commercial gain. Her critics, were notably, non-elite designers who I suggest were pointing out how her “new” shift had perpetuated rather than disrupted a system of class inequality.

However, while OGAANs 25th anniversary was yet another example in which a small, upper-class audience re-asserted their power, it also represented a partial shift. Unlike BE OPEN, the event that set the scene of this dissertation, the panel gathered at “OGAAN at 25” addressed the politics

of fashion, craft, commercial success and morality in a more reflexive and self-conscious way. Rather than blindly propagating the Indian craftsmen, actors like Mayank, who were definitely regarded as the most intelligent critics of the industry, were self-reflexive and conscious about naturally substituting craft for fashion, and craftsman for designer. I suggest this kind of consciousness was what was actually “emerging.”

The relationship between craft and fashion has been at the heart of this dissertation. While I argue that high-end Indian designers have joined a timeless historical “cult” that seeks to “revive” and “save” the Indian craftsman (Mathur 2007), I suggest that the way this agenda manifests in the context of Indian couture is different. As I have shown, for Indian fashion designers, celebrating the Indian craftsman is a means to claim ethics, Indianness, and morality in a fast-moving, immoral fashion industry.

While like other visual producers, Indian fashion designers often imagine going “back” in time by employing Indian craft, this also gives birth to paradoxical temporal metaphors that mark their language as they move fast and upwards (Chapter 5). Moreover, I discuss that while Indian fashion designers seem to suffer from an unresolvable problem of belatedness, which Mathur (2007) discusses as an ongoing predicament for contemporary South Asian artists, these “backwardness” is not necessarily rejected. Rather, I show a claim to the “past,” which is made through showcasing the work of Indian craftsman, becomes a way for designers to mark themselves as not, or rather, more than just fashion designers. I show how to some extent, designers like Aneeth Arora (Chapter 5) actually work hard to maintain these problems of belated time—such as the classic Indian delay—to distance themselves from the fashion industry.

Through analyzing multiple ethnographic excerpts, I have highlighted how despite being successful, many designers are skeptical about their roles in the industry and privately discuss the failure of the Western, ready-to-wear market that has led to this moment. For many designers, while

centralizing the Indian craftsman and honoring Indian textile has come as an easy or logical solution, for many, this turn, especially through bridal wear, represents a lost sense of power and a sense of creativity. For others, this shift has also raised the question of who Indian fashion was made for, in the name of being middle class. As Sonali, an unimpressed designer on my table at OGAAN's 25th anniversary, put it" "To now impress the elite, craft and textile is becoming mainstream fashion."

This dissertation begins by outlining the primary goal of Indian fashion: to create a ready-to-wear industry produced by the Indian middle class for export. From the very outset, I introduce my readers to the discrepancies between the stated goal of establishing a ready-to-wear fashion industry and the everyday ways in which the elite subverted this mission. In Chapter Two, I highlight this discrepancy to show how couture, or the peak of Indian fashion, is far from the original, stated mission of Indian fashion. However, because of the lucrative possibilities that emerge out of it for middle-class designers, I show how despite its use of craft, bridal wear continues to be dismissed by the elite. To counter this system of value in which "new" middle class designers appropriate craft – which they were historically denied access to -- I show how designers like Neelima originally resited it by making simple, well cut, luxurious Western wear.

In Part Two, I locate the multiple new subjectivities that have emerged from the production of Indian fashion. For example, in Chapter Three, I show how Masterjis, who are often imagined to be the most powerful actors in the new, crafts-based fashion industry, find ways to claim back their power over designers. One of the main ways in which this is enacted is through resisting the familial language designers use to assert proximity; rather than accepting this, I have shown how Masterjis work hard at crafting themselves as professionals, adopting terms like "CEOs" to describe themselves. Moreover, in Chapter Four, I show how madness—which marks certain designers who are commercially successful but not fully satisfied, and neither old nor new money—is a subject-position that negotiates these stayed binaries.

By exploring these varied subjectivities that were created by the purported Indian fashion boom, this dissertation sees the industry as a lens to view the last two decades of India's liberalization reforms that created it. Moreover, as power shifts from a Congress left to a Hindu right, a transition marked by the overwhelming victory of BJP candidate Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, I find my interlocutors engaged more than ever before in Indian politics. At this time, most find Modi's policies to have paradoxical outcomes for fashion that, I suggest, map on to the larger ambiguities about the nation's shift towards neoliberalism or an era Arundati Roy describes at *The Privatization of Everything* (2012). For many designers, Modi's seemingly ethical, pro-business philosophy is paradoxically disturbing and impressive. Some predict that his governance will bring a long needed "professionalization" to the industry while many (specifically the established elite) are still concerned about what kinds of Indians this "professionalization" will bring to the forefront.

However, there seems to be the feeling across the board that Modi's campaign that rides on the slogan of "good days coming" will at least bring about financial profit. Many designers claim that they have in fact already experienced business expansion as a result of new governance, but are still not quite comfortable fully admitting or celebrating it. While crediting their success to a "new" India, few producers fail to ask about the cost of their gains. In this light, I see the metaphors of "toning down" and "simplifying," which designers like Neelima are currently celebrated for, as language that makes sense of this uncertain position. I suggest that many current and commercially successful designers are grappling with how to be both more capitalistic and ethical at the same time; this was what one choreographer defined for me as being "chill but edgy" – an aesthetic she saw as an "intelligent but reflective position" in post-liberalized India. I suggest that more widely, vibrant debates about developing an aesthetic called Indian Minimalism,¹⁸⁸ or "chill but edgy" fashion were ways designers were identifying themselves as proudly but cautiously Indian.

¹⁸⁸ See introduction for a discussion of Indian Minimalism.

The Future of Indian Fashion

Many of my informants asked me to speculate on the future of Indian fashion when I was wrapping up my dissertation, and the more cynical designers asked me to reflect upon whether it was an industry with any future at all. While I cannot provide any predictions about the future profitability of fashion, I would like to conclude by proposing how to further ways study it, and address the many unanswered questions that this dissertation raises.

Firstly, a big question that this dissertation leaves unanswered is the relationship between sexuality and power, even though its importance is hinted at throughout. As I have noted briefly, most of India's top designers are gay men. Though this almost seems to be a universal fact in fashion industries across the globe, I do not suggest that we take its "universality" as a fully satisfactory answer or as an excuse to not probe this relationship any further. In the case of Indian fashion specifically, I would like to further examine what this means for a nation in which homosexuality continues to be illegal while patriarchy, as I have shown, is very much alive. In a future study, I would be interested in understanding how the contours of gay power play out within the grammar of kinship that I show pervades the workplaces of Indian fashion. My questions include: how does gay power intersect with the titles of brotherhood that designers endow upon their masters? how does homosexuality get concealed or performed through owner-master bonds that are often expressed through the language of love?

Second, throughout this dissertation I have maintained the idea that fashion for many designers, or to be designers, still means mass-produced, ready-to-wear, Western garments. In order to trouble the hegemonic paradigm that craft and textile is equated to Indian fashion, I have insisted on using the terms "Indian fashion" and the "Indian fashion designer" rather than the "craftsman" through these chapters to highlight the difference between the dominant and more occluded histories of Indian fashion. However, while I have made a case to maintain ready-to-wear fashion as

a legitimate and still thriving definition of fashion, this study lacks a full analysis of a factory or a designer who works in an export house that produces affordable, mass produced fashion. In a second ethnography of Indian fashion, I would like to study these spaces as exemplary of the kind of fashion that was established by NIFT in 1986, and that are specifically directed towards the Indian middle class. Moreover, such a study would necessarily include a close examination of huge e-commerce portals—including Pernia’s Pop Up Shop.com, ogaan.com, jabong.in, and amazon.in—that for many producers and consumers are completely transforming the fashion experience. For many middle-class designers who explain their success as shaped by class and caste disadvantages, technology offers a good shot at a potentially egalitarian platform. “Now my work can reach anywhere in the world, and people will judge me not for who I am (like in India) but what I make,” designer Jenjum Gadi told me at the close of Amazon Fashion Week in 2015. While I am curious to see how Gadi’s and others hopes will manifest through the joining of technology and Indian fashion, I am uncertain whether this medium will iron out the historical inequalities of the industry.

Finally, the focus of this dissertation has been on the subject of the designer whose labor I have argued is increasingly disappearing from the production of Indian high fashion or couture. I have suggested that this disappearance on some level turns the way anthropologists have understood creativity or the value of creative industries on its head. I have declared the Indian fashion industry to be an exception in some sense, particularly because it values material labor, handcrafted embroidery or “work” above any skills that are linked to the designer’s creativity. I suggest that in emotionally heightened gatherings where it is always deemed that the craftsman needs “saving,” it is actually the designer who is perhaps in most trouble.

Given this surprising observation, I suggest that a future study in Indian couture or Indian high fashion involves a closer look at the history of textile and craft that is held up as the way forward for Indian fashion. During this study, designers who blurred this line and who called

themselves textile designers often told me that this label allowed them a certain kind of protection. For example, Sanjay Garg revealed that his power was predicated upon people not having access to question Indian textiles and thus, questioning the sanctity that marks it. “If someone criticizes the sari, they will look like a fool,” he explained. I would be interested in conducting a closer investigation of these kinds of statements and probe the forms of protection that textile designers like him allude to. Furthermore, I would like to investigate the claim that Indians do not engage with Indian textiles but are more comfortable critiquing Indian fashion. I suggest that asking such questions may reveal that what is termed Indian and glossed as unworthy of interrogation may where the deepest contradictions about developing India are harnessed.

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