

Re-Searching Textile-Nature Partnerships: Rhythms and Rituals of Desi Oon

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ABSTRACT

The fashion industry has contributed to biodiversity loss and the marginalisation of indigenous materials, ecosystems, and communities, undermining local knowledge, livelihoods, and cultures. This paper focusses on Desi Oon (indigenous wool) practices in India, exploring the often-overlooked immaterial partnerships between textile crafts and nature, rooted in rituals, rhythms, and folklore.

This developmental paper discusses the secondary research phase of this PhD, which analyses social media data to examine how Desi Oon ecosystem foster a sense of custodianship towards nature. While prior research highlights ecological practices and the use of natural materials in Indian crafts, I identify immaterial dimensions as cultural resources to envision sustainable futures. These findings will serve as a foundation for the fieldwork phase, where arts-based methods (ABM), such as object interviews and relational mapping, will be used to uncover deeper connections between textile practices and their ecological contexts.

Positioned within the broader discourse of design for pluriverse, this research highlights how textile-nature partnerships bring forth diverse ways of knowing and being coexist. The research aims to develop an intercultural methodological framework to contribute to designers' research process, ways to engage with local cultural contexts. This emphasises the role of fashion as a hub for learning and unlearning with nature, contributing to the discourse on cultural sustainability and design for pluriverse.

Keywords: Fashion and Nature, Indigenous Wool, Desi Oon, Pluriverse, Textile Craft

INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of the preliminary phase of my PhD and discusses the intricate relationships between *Desi Oon*¹ and nature, focusing on 'artisanal knowledge' in the

¹ Desi means 'land or country', describing the people, cultures, and products of the Indian subcontinent and their diaspora and Oon means wool in Hindi. Desi Oon is a collective developed by supported by the Centre for Pastoralism to revitalise India's indigenous wool economy.

craft ecosystem (Santos, 2018). The PhD aims to address three core questions: What connections exist between Desi Oon and nature; How can arts-based methods uncover these connections?; and What role can these methods play in designing for the pluriverse? For this paper, the focus is on understanding the desi oon craft ecosystem and presenting the framework that would be used to explore these connections in the upcoming second phase of the PhD. This research is situated within Fletcher and Tham's (2019) Earth Logic framework, advocating for design-nature partnerships embedded in local contexts.

Structured after Sundberg's (2014) three-step process for pluriversal engagements: 'locating the self,' 'learning to learn,' and 'walking with', this paper focuses on the first two stages. Relational mapping aids the 'locating the self' stage, while secondary research's focus on rituals and rhythms constitutes the 'learning to learn' stage. The arts-based methods planned for upcoming fieldwork, such as object interviews and relational mapping, will form the 'walking with' stage, combining scientific knowledge and artisanal knowledge to bring forth the relational network between human and non-human in the *desi oon* ecosystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Craft practices are repositories of tacit knowledge, fostering custodianship of local ecosystems through culturally embedded practices (Zhan & Walker, 2019; Reubens, 2019). However, the global fashion industry operates within the One-World World (OWW) framework (Escobar, 2016), world that has assumed the role of 'the' world, subjecting all other worlds to its terms or non-existence, privileging extraction and commodification over relational ways of knowing. Within this context, the value of indigenous materials like desi oon has diminished, with finer, imported wool displacing local practices. This has disrupted not only pastoralist livelihoods but also the biodiversity and ecological systems sustained by these communities (Das & Iyengar, 2021).

While existing design literature highlights the material and ecological dimensions of craft, the immaterial connections between craft and nature through rituals, folklore, and socio-cultural practices are often overlooked. These connections serve as 'cultural resources' for visionary future thinking and resisting the homogenising tendencies of OWW (Hulme, 2017).

To address these gaps, this research draws on Epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2016) and Escobar's (2016) concept of the pluriverse. Epistemologies of the South emphasise the production and integration of scientific and non-scientific knowledge, fostering new relations among these diverse epistemologies (Santos, 2012). The

pluriverse challenges the universalism of Western modernity, advocating for a worldview that acknowledges and embraces coexisting realities. Pluriversal contact zones, spaces where diverse worlds intersect, offer pathways to integrate scientific and artisanal knowledge (practical, empirical, popular and vernacular knowledges, forming ecologies of knowledges (Santos, 2018).

Why Desi Oon?

India's wool industry, with over 40,000 skilled pastoralists and 43 registered sheep breeds (Das, 2021; Iyengar, 2021), has declined sharply due to reliance on imported wool, which is softer and finer than the coarse desi oon. Despite these challenges, efforts to revitalise Desi Oon have gained momentum. Initiatives like the Centre for Pastoralism's Desi Oon Hub, a collective of 13 community organisation/enterprises working with desi oon have rebuilt desi oon value chains by integrating ecological stewardship with economic sustainability (Centre for Pastoralism, 2022). Desi Oon thus is an 'active material' (Ingold, 2013), mediating relationships between humans, animals, and land, thereby shaping cultural and environmental landscapes, offering valuable insights into design for pluriverse.

METHODOLOGY AND DISCUSSION

The methodology is structured around two key components: Relational Mapping and Secondary Research Analysis of Artisanal Knowledge.

Situating Self: Relational Mapping

Relational mapping serves as both a methodological tool and a reflexive practice to explore the networks and relationships within craft ecosystems. Drawing on Wilson's (2008) perspective that knowledge in indigenous research emerges through the creation of relationships rather than discovery, I use relational mapping as a foundational step before fieldwork. This method allows participants to visualise and narratively situate themselves within their networks, fostering a three-way dialogue between participants, the researcher, and the emergent visualisation, revealing how connections are perceived and prioritised (Boden, Larkin, & Iyer, 2019)

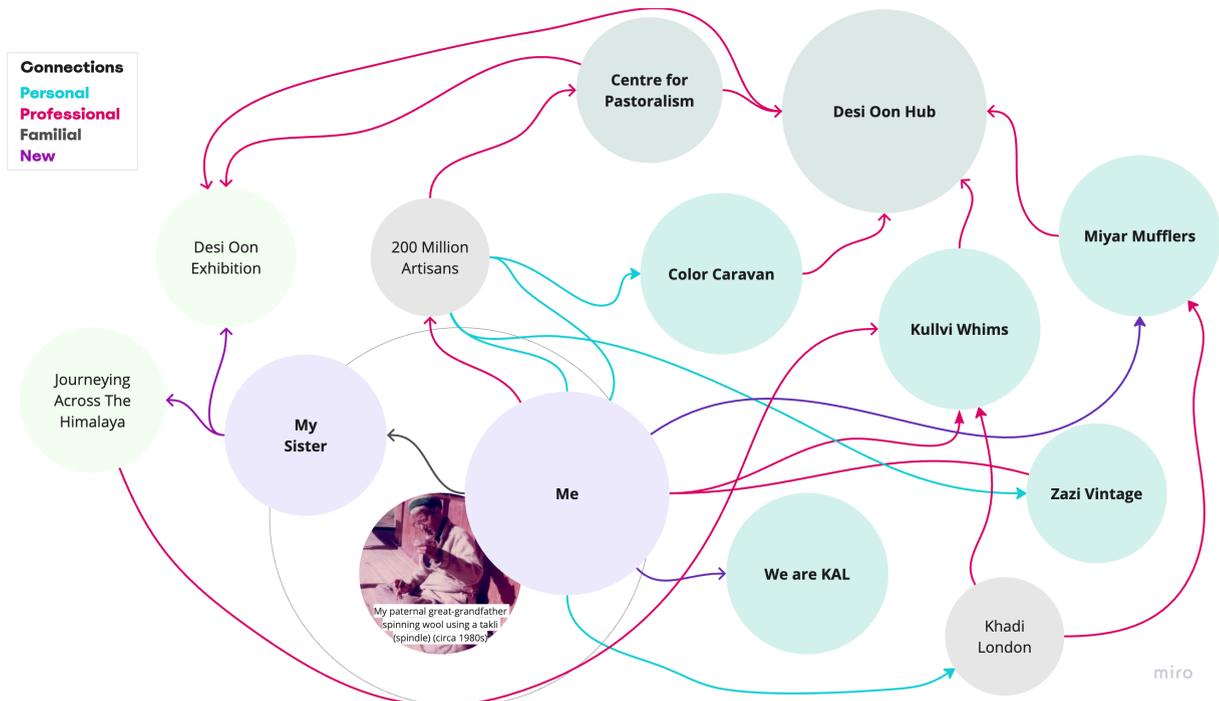


Figure 1 Mapping new and old connections to desi oon

This approach reflects my dual positionality as both an insider, due to cultural ties to Himachal Pradesh, and an outsider, shaped by my education and research in urban and international contexts. Balancing these roles requires continuous reflexivity to assess how my position influences research dynamics, data interpretation, and the representation of communities. Relational mapping facilitates this reflexive practice, to navigate these two roles and appreciate diverse ways of knowing.

Learning to Learn: Artisanal Knowledge in Himalayas

To engage with the artisanal knowledge within the *desi oon* community, I conducted secondary research through a content analysis of Instagram posts from four design enterprises: Kullvi Whims, We are KAL, Rani & Reine, and Miyar Mufflers. These enterprises, based in Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh, were selected for their active social media presence and association with the Desi Oon Hub. Captions from Instagram posts over the past year were analysed using themes of Rituals and Rhythms, derived from the literature review and using Sachdev’s (2022) BREOSA model (Base Raw Material, Resources, Ecology, Ornament, Surface, and Analogy), which differentiates the material and immaterial dimensions of textile-nature partnerships (see Figure 02).



Figure 2 Material and immaterial dimensions of nature-textile partnerships. Adapted from Sachdev (2022).

The theme of Rituals highlights traditional practices, storytelling, and symbolic acts tied to textile production, such as ancestral weaving methods and the cultural significance of desi oon. Rhythms reflect temporal and ecological cycles, including sheep shearing, weaving patterns, and seasonality, illustrating the alignment between artisanal production and natural systems.

Rituals: Embodied Practices and Sacred Relationships

Designing for the pluriverse requires attentiveness to language that respects diverse human experiences across cultures, classes, ethnicities, genders, spiritualities, and species (Noel et al., 2023). Local stories, micro-histories, and mythologies are manifestations of oral knowledge, where storytellers, coauthors of ancestral narratives, straddle the past, present, and future (Santos, 2018). These narratives are deeply rooted in relationships with nature, time, and the cosmos, offering invaluable, context-specific insights for pluriversal design. Storytelling as a method of engaging with oral knowledge stimulates collective knowledge production.

The interplay of rituals and rhythms with nature is central to the practices of Himalayan pastoralist communities, particularly the *Gaddis*², who weave spirituality, ecology, and livelihood. Their spirituality is deeply tied to the cosmologies of the mountainous landscapes they inhabit and is expressed through rituals that emphasise the sacredness of place (Christopher & Phillimore, 2023). For instance, spinning desi oon as part of a wedding ritual is seen as a sacred act:

² Gaddis are the shepherds, pastoralist community who live primarily in two districts of Himachal Pradesh: Chamba and Kangra

‘Wool is an important element of the cultural fabric of the communities of Kullu Valley, so much so that spinning wool is a wedding ritual. Women of the family sit together on the Jagra, the day before the wedding, and spin yarn on a takli. The wool is spun with great care, and the yarn is unbroken; its continuity signifies the thread of life, ensuring a long and happy relationship.’ (Kullvi Whims, 2024)

Rituals like spinning are imbued with symbolic meaning, linking desi oon production to broader themes of continuity, care, and community. Similarly, the spiritual relationship between *Gaddis* and their livestock is evident in local mythologies, where sheep and goats are believed to have been created by Lord Shiva to help *Gaddis* endure the harsh Himalayan winters (Centre for Pastoralism, 2017).

‘Himalayan Shepherd at Hampta carrying and caring for a newborn lamb like it’s her own. Sheep are part of the extended family, and every lamb is looked after with the utmost attention.’ (Kullvi Whims, 2024)



Figure 3 Image courtesy: @kullvi_whims, 2024

‘Their creations take place in the goddess temple, believed to have been spun by the deity herself in the form of a spider.’ (Zazi Vintage, 2024)

These narratives highlight storytelling as a ritual practice that bridges past and present, connecting craft practices to ecological settings and cosmological beliefs, fostering a sense of custodianship towards nature.

Rhythms: Seasonal Cycles and Temporal Practices

Rhythms here refers to the temporal patterns and ecological cycles that structure the production and use of desi oon. Seasonal changes dictate practices such as shearing, dyeing, and weaving, reflecting the interconnectedness of craft and nature. For example, one caption highlights the importance of weather in preparing desi oon:

‘The busiest season of the year is slowly starting. We are going with the weather and are waiting for warmer temperatures for the drying of the wool.’ (We Are KAL, 2024)

Desi Oon communities also adapt their practices to ‘new nature’ through temporal practices and improvisation, showcasing their resourcefulness. Their ability to innovate within constraints reflects a harmonious relationship with both their traditional and evolving environments.



Figure 4 Artisans using a plastic chair and iron rods from the foundation of house construction to make hanks. Image courtesy @kullvi_whims (left), and @we_are_kal (right), 2024

‘The warp, hand-spun natural sheep wool, is achieved by going past the rods in the ground. At the end, some rods will be removed, and after getting the tension right, the threads are transferred to the traditional backstrap loom. Then the weaving can start!’ (We are KAL, 2024)

‘Our artisans are incredibly resourceful. Here, Indra @indirasood17 is skilfully creating a woollen hank (aati) for dyeing, using an innovative setup with two chairs. This clever solution, known as ‘Jugaad’ in Hindi, exemplifies the creativity and ingenuity of our artisans’. (Kullvi Whims, 2024)

One can see how desi oon craft ecosystems are embedded in relational ontologies, where every act of production is tied to a broader network of social, cultural, and ecological relationships. The interactions with nature can be seen as a source of learning, patience, and resilience. Seasonal migrations, variable weather patterns, and ecological interdependencies shape not only their craft but also their worldview. A caption from Kullvi Whims notes:

'Imagine trekking over 600 km through the majestic Himalayan ranges, braving every whim of weather. This isn't a tale of extreme adventure sports - it's the life of Himalayan shepherds. Here, the bond between human, animal, and nature unfolds in its purest form:

 *Horses, the gentle giants, carefully carry newborn lambs*

 *Loyal dogs stand guard, ever vigilant in protecting their woolly charges*

 *Sharp-eyed goats serve as nature's alarm system, alerting to any lurking predators*

This isn't just a journey; it's a dance of survival, trust, and instinct. Each player - human and animal alike - has a crucial role in this nomadic tradition of transhumance.' (Kullvi Whims, 2024)

These rituals and rhythms of desi oon craft reflect the sacred interconnectedness of people, their livestock, and the land, offering pathways to pluriversal design by shaping ethical and relational practices grounded in local contexts.

Walking With: Arts-Based Methods

The next phase of this research, in March 2025 involves empirical data collection in Himachal Pradesh, using two arts-based methods inspired by artisans' storytelling traditions, which I have observed in previous fieldwork. ABM emphasise sensory, kinaesthetic ways of knowing, that encourage play, intuition, serendipity, dialogic communication, enabling exploration beyond verbal expressions (Gerber et al., 2012; Kara, 2015; Singh & Chrysagis, 2019). These methods are particularly suited to Himachal Pradesh's rich oral traditions, where folklore and material culture intersect in the social and spiritual lives of its communities (Bhardwaj, 2015).

Object Interviews

This method explores material culture as a tool for knowledge generation, creating a dialogue between objects, interviewees, and interviewers (Woodward, 2020). For example, storied textiles like *Pattu*, *Dohru*, and Shawls embody cultural narratives tied to the desi oon ecosystem (Iyengar, 2021). I will use my personal collection of *dohrus* (blanket), as anchors, to evoke stories and memories, transforming artifacts into social objects (Woodward, 2020; Harre, 2002). This process highlights my insider-outsider

positionality and fosters collaborative storytelling, turning interviews into collective acts of meaning-making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012).

Walks for Relational Mapping

Walking research methods facilitate data collection through dynamic interactions between the researcher and participants while traversing and engaging with their social and physical landscapes (Kusenbach, 2003; Evans & Jones, 2011). Inspired by the significance of navigation in pastoralist communities, walking methods will be used to record human and non-human relationships. Participants will create relational maps using photos and voice clips that reflect local oral cultures. These maps, co-created through storytelling, will reveal the social-ecological connections at the heart of the desi oon ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on the critical role of fashion and textile design as hubs for learning and unlearning with nature. By examining rituals and rhythms within the desi oon craft ecosystem, it highlights how indigenous knowledge systems can inform pluriversal design paradigms. The findings position desi oon as a site of resistance against the extractive logic of the One-World World, advocating for relational approaches that honour local contexts. The use of arts-based methods in subsequent phases aims to bring forth artisanal knowledge, contributing to ethical and collaborative research practices.

Feedback from the conference will be invaluable in refining these methods. Ultimately, this work aspires to contribute to the theoretical and practical development of pluriverse through an intercultural framework that honours indigenous knowledge systems while enabling collaboration with design practitioners.

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