# Sustainable Journeys: Mediated Relationships between Australian Designers and Indian Textile Artisans.

Key words: Sustainability, Heritage Textiles, Artisan, Australia, India

India is a highly regarded source of manufactured clothing and textiles. It is the second largest textile producer in the world after China, with the largest number of looms and 8% of the global trade None of this is surprising, as India has a rich textile heritage going back over 5000 years . However, for some time much of the fashion industry has used India’s industry in an unethical fashion, obsessed with maximizing profit at the expense of traditional heritage techniques and the environment . By contrast, over the last decade ethical fashion movements such as slow fashion, up cycling and zero waste as well as a reconsideration of traditional techniques of clothing and textile manufacture have gained international momentum. Australia has been slower to adopt such practices, but recent movements by designers and universities have started to address these concerns. As Australia and India draw closer to a free trade agreement, there has never been a better time to move towards ethical and sustainable partnerships between designers and manufacturers.

These emergent ethical fashion movements place importance on factors besides the financial bottom line. Eco businesses flourish, consumers are increasingly aware of trends in ecologically sustainable consumerism and academics contextualize new business models. As early as 1998, John Elkington was writing about the concept of the triple bottom Line considering people (human capital), planet (natural capital) as well as profit (financial capital). These concepts, while in development for some time, made academics and businesspeople rethink traditional models of production and distribution and are now used by many NGOs, cooperatives and private businesses. Sustainability, according to Yencken and Wilkinson “has not one but three pillars: ecological sustainability, social sustainability and economic sustainability” . This proposed fourth generates debate as to its nature. Health professionals argue that health should be the fourth pillar. Another group led by Yencken and Wilkinson as well as Hawkes argues that it should be cultural capital. These four capitals carry considerable weight in India, a country that possesses a living culture thousands of years old. Textiles and clothing crafts are central to Indian culture. Gandhi chose the symbol of the loom as a rallying point for Indian nationalism precisely for this reason. Such crafts are defined and gain meaning from the “structures, values, history and identity of the communities in which they are practiced” Manufactured objects, a bolt of fabric or a piece of embroidery, for example, speak volumes about the community from which it originates if we but know the context and significance of the object. Jaya Jaitly argues that,

craft is not just about marketing and economics although without these there would be no craftspeople left. It is also about the essence of India’s culture and the creative vocabulary of its perpetrators. For a craftsperson, his self-respect, recognition and dignity are as important as the quality of his daily bread.

Australian designers entering the Indian market need to be aware of cultural issues and communication. Cultural capital, the fourth pillar, is trickier to implement than it seems and cultural blundering can occur. In mid-2011, Australian designer Lisa Burke, included an image of Lakshmi on a range of swimwear . Such garments may have been considered as stylish and beautiful by western consumers, however the use of the goddess’ image on a range of skimpy and sexy swimwear was an affront for Hindus worldwide. Respected Australian textile designer, Sara Thorn had a similar experience demonstrating how easily such cultural miscommunications occur. Although working well and culturally sensitively in India for more than twenty years, Thorn found herself in difficult cultural territory when a group of Kolkata embroiders bluntly refused to work on an image of a half naked western women on cultural grounds. Thorn apologized and revised her approach . Joan Bowers, another Australian designer collaborating with India for over twenty years, respects that each family within the Jaipur community she works with has its own unique embroidery style and while she may create demand for what she chooses, she always chooses styles and methods that remain authentic . Brisbane based designers Easton Pearson also built a reputation on collaborating with Indian artisans for their unique ethnic designs. McNeil argues that their “sense of respect, of materiality, of making and of authoring textiles with a series of actors from entrepreneurs in Mumbai to rural workers in Kutch, is presented as a possible new way to consider the process of fashion design” .

 In 2012, the Indian marketplace is in a rapid state of change, as India moves from being considered primarily a manufacturing nation towards developing as a consumption powerhouse. Indian innovation and design, largely invisible in the past is now being recognized on the international market with award winning design . Abhijit Bansod of Studio ABD, for example has won many local and international awards for his cultural motives and new age thinking in design such as the 2011 British council Young Design Entrepreneur award and Germanys Red Dot design award in 2010. Medhavi Gandhi, from the Happy Feet Foundation received a special commendation from the British Council for her innovation to revive craft in India. Aura Textiles recently won the innovation award at London’s Ethical Fashion Forum for their sustainable journey in herbal dying. To support such innovative design, Indian consumer spending is growing at a rate of 20% per year with an estimated US$1.3 trillion worth of retail sales by 2018 . This brings new and exciting opportunities for both India and the international market.

The question remains whether such growth is sustainable in international markets. Marks and Spencer’s head of sustainability, Mike Barry , asserts that if we do not change the way we do business, we will not be in business in ten years’ time. Barry points out that there are one billion first-world consumers right now with another billion consumers in emergent economies such as India and China. Although these consuming societies bring exciting new markets and great opportunities, there just simply will not be enough resources to go around he asserts. Fashion sustainability has been on the academic agenda for well over a decade and it is slowly trickling into the mass consciousness but the future shape of the industry, and what extent the quadruple bottom line will play in it is still unknown. Yet, Tim Wilson says that we are still becoming sustainable and no one really knows what it looks like right now. British model Erin O’Connor recently spent time in India with the Self–Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) to raise awareness for craftswomen. She admits she never thought much about the hands that made her garments or what their working conditions may have been like. Like many consumers, she presumed her clothes where produced by a fully automated industry . Industry innovators know sustainability is not just a trend, but also an essential emergent business practice. It is part of the industry’s and academy’s responsibility to educate consumers making them aware of environmental and ethical issues in the supply chain.

Compared to the UK and Europe, Australian fashion sustainability is in an early stage of development. Some of the mainstream Australian trade fairs are beginning to focus and promote ethical and environmentally friendly fashion companies. 3fish, a Melbourne based company, won an award for its innovation at the Fashion Exposed trade fair held in Melbourne in 2011. Amid the sea of mass production and mainstream manufacturers complaining how tough business has become, a small sustainable fashion group spoke and shared ideas on their practices and businesses. However, it’s challenging to be sustainable in Australia. A 2008 report commissioned by the Brotherhood of St Lawrence states that small to medium Australian manufactures – 87% of the industry – find it difficult to find any suppliers willing to undertake their manufacture, let alone ones that consider ethical and environmental issues . Meanwhile Indian artisans, with heritage manufacturing techniques going back to the dawn of civilization, are living on the poverty line. It is nearly impossible for such artists to find manufacturers to directly team up with.

However, amid the ethical fashion movement, there are signs of hope, as programs develop to match up suppliers desiring ethical manufacturing techniques with artisans who can provide them such as The London College of Fashion’s program Shared Talent India, and the new Australian initiative Artisans of Fashion both of which encourage designers to offer a transparent supply chain and share their contacts. Such programs represent a positive and sustainable step amidst globalizing that the rest of the world, Australia included, cannot afford to ignore. Significant business occurs between Australia and India. Australia currently supplies India with 50% of its wool imports, making this a US $98 million industry. India is Australia’s third largest market. In 2008/09 Australia imported US$239 million of clothing, textiles and footwear from India (Australian Government & Government of India 2010, p.17). The free trade agreement between Australia and India when finalized will see Indian manufacturers delivering goods to Australia without duties and innovative Australian designers will have the opportunity to supply India without the current high tariff on clothing. This is a perfect opportunity to develop a strong, sustainable and ethical partnership in the fashion industry.

However to reach full potential, perceptions still need to change. Australian consumers may incorrectly consider Indian-made product as cheap and of less quality. Indian consumers have not widely been exposed to the positive aspects of Australian design. Australian design is starting to make an Indian impact. For example, Vogue India reported Bollywood actress Anushka Sharma attending the Dubai International Film Festival in a dress by Australian designer Rachel Gilbert (Vogue India 2011). Educated designers understand the intricacy of Indian textiles created by talented artisans and excited by the luxurious handwork. Saris are an example of textile excellence, incorporating magnificent weaving, exquisite dying and precious embroidery. Garments produced in India are often judged by workmanship rather than cost. International consumer markets, however, are often unaware of this. There are already a few Australian designers working with Indian artisans who are adding another layer of unique design excellence to the work while considering multiple capitals when sourcing from India.

**Akira Isagowa**, an internationally recognized Australian designer, showcasing his work in Paris and sells around the globe. He creates beautiful and timeless pieces that are feminine, fluid and ethereal. Underlying Akira’s work are the relationships he builds with his suppliers. He regularly travels to India to meet the artisans he collaborates with. These crafts are very important to him. He sees “craftsmanship as an implement with which to realize one’s vision. Past, present and future; that slogan continues in almost everything around which my work evolves.” A relationship with craftspeople developing fashion that doesn’t go out of date – incidentally one of the tenets of slow fashion – is important.

**Megan Park**, An RMIT graduate, found herself in London designing textiles for Givenchy, Dries Van Noten and Kenzo, spending many years in India developing the collections. Now back in Australia designing her own collections, she has built a strong local and international following for her exquisite designs, selling to over twenty countries. Passionate about her hand crafted textiles and artisan connection; she works very closely with her factory in Calcutta and artisans in many villages.

Marty and Natalie Dillon began their label **3fish** in 2008 along ethical Fair-trade lines. They are quickly gaining a reputation for innovation in sustainable design, being named one of Australia’s “coolest” businesses in Anthill Magazine and winning the Sustainability Leadership for SME’s award at the United Nations Association of Australia. Using Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) certified organic cotton and dyes, 3fish work closely with their Indian manufacturers and are fair-trade certified to ensure fair living wages for all employees. Their packaging is recycled and the company is Low CO2 certified, offsetting their omissions by supporting the Karnataka Renewable Energy Project.

Pam Easton and Lydia Pearson of **Easton Pearson** work closely with India, embracing heritage craft and engaging techniques that in some cases have not been used for decades . They work closely with the Shrujen co-operative out of Mumbai who engage with women in Kutch, together collaborating to create new textiles. For the artisan this has brought a regular income and a stronger sense of pride for their work. Easton Pearson import the panel pieces to Australia and construct the finished garment at their studio in Brisbane . This collaboration is regarded as a major modern success, creating a fusion of modern Australian and traditional Indian styles that is sold all over the world.

There are also a few Australian designers based in India, working closely with Indian teams to manufacture for the international market. By being on-site, they are able to ensure quality control as well as ethical and heritage concerns are addressed.

**Gabrielle Scarvelli** who began selling Indian-manufactured fashion in early 2004. Focused not only on aesthetics but also ethics and ecological design, his collections were dyed organically, used natural fibers and recycled materials where possible and donated fabric scraps to a local kindergarten to use as artwork. He also worked with Calcutta-based artisans, paying them 48 times the average wage . This product was released before ethical concerns were a force in Australian fashion, and he ceased production in 2007. However, he continues to run a production factory called TCQ in Delhi supplying labels such as Armani and a few select Australian brands with luxurious products that are ethically manufactured.

**Francis Carrington** graduated from Sydney Institute of Technology in 1994. The following year she found herself managing a tailoring department at the Norbulinga institute in Dharamsala as a volunteer, teaching Tibetan refugees sewing and design skills. When this program ended, touched by the stories and falling in love with India, she decided to start her own childrenswear and womenswear label, Eternal Creations. By the 2000s, the business had grown to the point she was able to open an ethical manufacturing factory, the Himalayan Tailoring Centre, in lower Dharamsala. She now employs over 40 locals and sells to over 200 stores around the world.

**Fiona Wright** is an Australian artist based in Pushkar. She offers textile tours of through Rajasthan and has developed a social enterprise business called The Stitching Project. Working with local artisans to manufacture clothing and homewares for the international market. She comments that “handwork is a lifeline in the slower environment of the developing world, when one meets the other a relationship of mutual appreciation and benefits can grow” .

While most cultural influence has been from India to Australia, Indian designer **Roopa Pemmaraju’s** “Earth Collection is inspired by “artworks of the Tiwi people of the Northern Territory” . With white Australia being a comparatively young country, this referencing of the older Aboriginal by an Indian designer is an interesting outgrowth of globalising markets and design.

Other projects aimed at developing Australian designer/Indian artisan relationships are emerging. Kevin Murray, vice president of the World Craft Council, is facilitating a three-year project called **SANGAM**, beginning in 2011. SANGAM investigates and develops the relationship between Australia and Indian design practice for the 21st century, aiming to develop fair standards to the manufacture of product in the craft sector. The program facilitates and develops ideas of Indian and Australian designers, educators and craftspeople sharing ideas on improving current systems of collaboration.

Another initiative, **Artisans of Fashion** seeks to develop commercial relationships between the Indian and Australian fashion industry. It aims to educate Australian consumers on the luxurious quality of hand crafted Indian made garments, while simultaneously introducing Australian fashion design to the Indian consumer. This nonprofit organization will be launched in August 2012 with a high profile parade in Sydney, followed by an exhibition in India later in the year. This initiative is also introducing a micro partnering project developing collaborations between Australian designers and Indian artisans creating direct ongoing commercial relations.

This is not a new concept. Rajiv Sethi, an Indian pioneer and strong advocate of craft, curated a New York-based exhibition entitled *The Golden Eye* in 1985. Sethi’s worked tirelessly to raise awareness and income for artisans but ultimately found governmental bureaucracy of the time unsupportive and restrictive. Today however, both the Indian and Australian governments are more financially supportive of artisan-based projects. Several organizations, such as Australia India Council (AIC), The Australian Department of foreign affairs and trade (DFAT), The Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), Australia India Institute (AII) and Austrade offer grants for education and entrepreneurial collaborations.

Australian universities also recognize the significant role India has to play in the design process, educating their students in relevant subjects, and conducting excursions to India exposing participants to centuries of craft. The Sydney-based College of Fine Arts, a faculty of the University of New South Wales, recently conducted a tour of Gujarat. The University of Technology, Sydney will be conducting a similar tour in July 2012 to Rajasthan, while RMIT in Melbourne encourage conversation and talks through various forums including the SANGAM project. The Australian government recognizes the importance of these projects, offering various grants to assist.

Ethical fashion is sustainable fashion. In an increasingly populated world with limited resources, the fashion industry simply does not have the luxury to ignore sustainable concerns. There is enormous potential for the relationship between the Australian and Indian fashion industries to become a cutting-edge and sustainable partnership. In order to do this, the discussed mediations are a solid first step to what needs to become the standard operating procedure within the industry. It is an exciting and daunting journey. In order to achieve what we are setting out to do, dedicated eco-conscious academics and industry professionals need to educate and communicate ethical fashion aesthetics in an enormous international market with established and profitable patterns of production and distribution dominated by distributors concerned with only profit, to whom the quadruple bottom line is a meaningless abstraction. India is an economically wealthy country with a rich cultural heritage. As the Australia-India relationship changes from designer-supplier to one in which both goods and intellectual property flows both ways, Australian designers and fashion labels seeking to build relationships with India can no longer afford to ignore ethical fashion issues.

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