

DO NOT CITE - this is a pre-publication version of the chapter:

Lucy Norris 2004. 'Creative entrepreneurs: the recycling of second-hand Indian clothing' in Clark, Hazel & Palmer, Alexandra (eds) 2004 *Old Clothes, New Looks*. Oxford, New York: Berg Publishers

## **Creative entrepreneurs: the recycling of second-hand Indian clothing**

### **Introduction**

In recent years, Western markets have been overflowing with furnishings and clothing made from Indian sari fabrics. Independent traders working in street markets, festivals and small boutiques sell a variety of cushions, bedspreads and wall hangings, alongside various items of clothing in Western styles, such as halter-neck tops, skirts and trousers. By mid-1999, British shops selling furniture and furnishings were festooned with Indian fabrics and designs made up into Western consumer goods. High street stores were selling mass-produced clothing featuring embroidery in a 'Gujarati style', appliqué designs using Indian fabrics and jeans with gold thread borders attached, following a 'trickle up' influence from the rising popularity of the clothing found in street markets across the country. These tastes were no doubt also fuelled by the growing number of backpackers and clubbers travelling to India directly who were buying such clothes in tourist havens across the country. However, unbeknownst to most consumers was the fact that the material origins of many of the products found in Western street markets lie in the entrepreneurial recycling of second-hand saris, which has in turn directly influenced the design styles of the high street.

This constitutes the opposite trajectory of two common aspects of scholarly research concerning the global trade in cloth and clothing and the relationship between the developed and developing worlds. Firstly, a burgeoning literature approaches the study of new Indian cloth as a product manufactured and produced for the export market, and the power relationships inherent in the trade during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-Independence periods (e.g. Guy 1998, Mukerjii 1983, Roy 1996). Secondly, the trade in second-hand clothing is either considered from a socio-economic perspective within Western societies (e.g. Gregson & Crewe 2003, Lemire 1988, 1997, McRobbie 1989, Stallybrass 1998), or conceived as a flow from the developed world to developing countries in Africa, Asia and South America (E.g. Hansen 2000).

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This chapter investigates the complex trajectories of discarded Indian clothing, ejected from the wardrobe to be transformed into new coverings for bodies, objects and places both in India and across the world. This research forms part of fieldwork undertaken in Delhi and north India amongst middle-class urban women, the Waghri dealers and manufacturers between June 1999 and July 2000. It focuses on the re-commodification of clothing through the entrepreneurial strategies of dealers in contemporary markets in India, looking at the factors which influence the various outcomes once garments are initially disposed of.

### **The commodification of old clothes**

The buying and giving of cloth and clothing constitutes an essential part of everyday life amongst all Indian families who can afford to do so. Whether purchased for daily activities or gifted at births, weddings, anniversaries and religious festivals, the flow of cloth through the household makes visible the construction of networks of relationships between kin and close friends. Special trousseau items are kept as inalienable objects by most women, bundled together and locked in wardrobes to be handed down to daughters and daughters-in-law (Weiner 1992). However, a strong aesthetic of smartness and newness prevails among the middle and upper middle classes; favoured cottons soon start to fade in Delhi's climate, silks tear and stain, and older clothes seen on earlier occasions no longer have the impact they once had when worn to a party. The problem arises of what to do with these unwanted clothes?

Most clothing constitutes a resource to be re-used and recycled as fit, a process of transformation which draws upon value systems beyond those most concerned with the operation of thrift within the confines of economic maximisation. Cloth is also valuable due to sentimental attachment, its role in constructing the family through networks of inheritance and handing on, and its usefulness in the fulfilment of obligations to others. Such qualities inherent in the cloth result in strategies of reuse which aim to capture and conserve these various values to maximum effect.

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As clothing is outgrown, torn or stained, fades or wears out, it is put aside until a suitable use appears. Even among the upper classes, very few pieces gain value as antique textiles, although some contain real gold and silver thread, and can be burnt to reclaim the precious metal. Among the middle classes, clothing is usually handed down to younger relatives wherever possible. If it is tattier, then it is offered to servants as part of a continually negotiated obligation to provide for them. Although domestic recycling is less common as more women work full time, favourite pieces of cloth are cut up and reused in quilts, as dress trimmings and furnishings, while soft cotton cloths become rags, dusters and pot holders. Cloth is never simply thrown away, and will be used up until it literally wears out.

Despite such accustomed trajectories, large amounts of clothes are thought to be more of a problem these days, and constitute a burgeoning resource for which new avenues must be found (Norris 2004). This is probably due to the move to smaller flats for nuclear families, the increasing distance between relatives to whom one used to pass them, and the built-in obsolescence of the fashion system. For the burgeoning middle-class, experiencing the consumer boom since the economy was opened up in the early 1990s, the 'traditional' strategies of the rural gentry, petty urban aristocracy and educated elite cannot keep pace with the perceived increase in surplus goods.

An increasingly popular option is to commodify clothing through a system of bartering. Clothing is exchanged for *bartan*, kitchen utensils. The old clothes dealers, *bartanwale*, literally 'those who deal in utensils', sit on the footpaths in suburban areas. On the road a few feet in front of them is a dazzling display of shining *bartan*, stainless steel plates, beakers, small bowls, storage jars and various cooking pots and pans and perhaps a small rack, sparkling in the sunlight (Fig.1). Women stop and ask how many garments the *bartanwale* want for a pot for dish that has caught their eye, and the bargaining begins. Once a preliminary agreement is made, they arrange a time to come to the woman's home to view the items. Once there, they remain seated on the doorstep, while the clothes are brought out to them. Passions become heated as favourite clothes are disdained by the dealers, and each tries to get the upper hand. After each garment and each pot is thoroughly examined, a deal is

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struck, and the *bartanwale* demand half a sari to bundle up their pickings, hauling them up over their shoulder.

Women claim to be exhausted by the process, but are pleased to have new pots for the kitchen. Pots are commonly given with clothes as part of women's dowries, and both remain within the female domestic economy; shining pots are frequently displayed on open shelves in the kitchen. Exchanging tatty clothing for a new pot replaces a disintegrating store of value with a more durable form of wealth, and brings women great pleasure. At a symbolic level, weaving is a metaphor for the creation of the universe, and uncut cloth symbolises the thread of continuity and the life cycle; pots are thought to be both containers of and embodiment of divinity in their many forms and ritual uses, and are also symbols of fertility. They are therefore an appropriate form of wealth for women on a multiplicity of levels.

Appadurai describes barter as 'the exchange of objects for one another *without* reference to money and *with* maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political, or personal transaction costs'; it is the effort to exchange things without the constraints of sociality nor the complications of money (Appadurai 1986: 9). The advantage of barter as a means of transaction is that it allows for the movement of objects between regimes of value through the exchange of sacrifices (Gell 1992). Both parties negotiate the deal knowing that at the end they are 'quits', and no further relationship between them will exist (Humphrey & Hugh-Jones 1992). The trader's relationship to other members of the society corresponds to the nature of the exchange. Exchange has certain moralities associated with it; 'embedded' exchange is socially rich, but disembedded exchange such as barter is anti-social. Those with whom one bargains should embody all that is 'anti-social' about the process, so the outcaste itinerant trader is the epitome of the exchange itself. The *bartanwale* are analogous to Simmel's stranger, who is both far from the community yet near by virtue of their presence (Simmel 1971).

## **The market in second-hand clothing**

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Most middle-class Indian women believe that the *bartanwale* simply take their unwanted clothing and sell them on to the poor. This imaginary trajectory creates a largely unproblematic fall in value from once treasured sari, suit or shirt to anonymous garment, cast-off and cast out. Such unwanted clothes appear to have minimal value to all but the most needy. As Thompson clearly demonstrated (1979), in order for objects to pass from the transient category of depreciating value to the durable category of accumulating value, there must be a third, covert category of 'rubbish', through which such goods must pass if their value is to be radically reassigned. Once singular garments become piles of 'stuff' stripped of their unique identities, heaps of material laid out in markets, waiting to be transformed into a new product. A key feature of the means through which the value of clothing is renegotiated through the mechanisms of the marketplace is its apparent secrecy, removed from the realm of the visible in the world-view of the middle-classes. The existence of a thriving community of old clothes dealers is largely unknown to middle-class Delhiites, who treat the *bartanwale* with undisguised disdain. Such lack of knowledge and their disregard for the women sitting on the pavements are key elements in the ability of the dealers to remove unwanted garments beyond the pale.

The role of the Waghri traders is similar to that of barbers and washer-men in Indian society as necessary removers of dirt, pollution and exuviae. Clothing, once taken off the body and divested, retains the essence of the person; it cannot simply be treated as 'rubbish', and also needs to be properly got rid of. Through barter the identity of the individual who once inhabited the garment is stripped away. The subsequent processing of used clothing in order to commodify them assists in the removal of bodily traces from the garments, according to the sensitivity of the subsequent consumer. Those outside the indigenous socio-economic and ritual hierarchy, foreigners for example, prove to be a popular target for dealers. Yet, although the origins of such cloth may not be particularly problematic for many non-Indian consumers, more subtle and complex manipulations of value are required for the elite home market. Middle- and upper-class Indian buyers require a high investment in material and conceptual transformation in order to remove or conceal the potentially polluting nature of used clothing, while the poor are less able to discriminate through need.

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The *bartanwale* with whom I worked are Waghris who have migrated to Delhi from Gujarat and north west India, and a community lives in a large suburb on the outskirts of the city. Most of the local population of 40,000 people earn a livelihood through dealing in used cloth in some capacity. The landscape is decorated with a multitude of clothing festooned from lines and draped across walls. Hundreds of pairs of faded blue jeans or coats regularly adorn the barriers of the main road. Through open doorways one sees piles of clothing bundled up in knotted old saris, or pairs of worn old shoes. Rows of tiny shops selling *bartan*, steel utensils, plastic tubs, glass bowls and china cups display their contents in serried ranks stretching yards out into the street. In this one suburb, the whole trade is visible - utensils are bought for the daily *pheriya* (doing the rounds), cast-off clothing is brought back to the home in the evening, and sold the next morning in the Ghora Mandi, the market and economic hub of the community. Local buyers then wash and mend them, or transform them into new products. While the poorest struggle to survive at the margins of the business dealing in scraps day-to-day, more resourceful, established entrepreneurs are able to maximise the value of different clothes by transforming unwanted clothing into new products. The increasing numbers of traders leads to more competition and lower returns, but this is precariously balanced by both the growing surpluses of clothing in middle-class wardrobes to be teased out, and the development of new markets for used cloth.

Earning a living is undoubtedly exhausting for those *bartanwale* with the least resources behind them. It is almost always the women who ply the trade, leaving young children at home with elder siblings. But unlike the usual suburban trade in rubbish and scrap carried out by male traders, *kabariwale*, this doorstep trade undoubtedly benefits from its significant character, that is of women dealing with women, which increases the chance of access to the domestic sphere and intimate possessions.

Every day the women get up long before dawn to take the previous day's clothing to the marketplace to sell, arriving from 3.00 am, and staying until 9.00 or 10.00 am until they are all sold. They then return home to prepare for the *pheriya*, travelling via the *bartan* shops to negotiate for more stock. By mid-morning they clamber into rickshaws or take a bus, often suffering abuse from city bus drivers who refuse to allow them on with their overfilled

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baskets of *bartan* carried over their shoulders. Travelling could take up to two hours in Delhi's traffic, traversing the length and breadth of the city. Many complained of police harassment for having no license to trade, and are forced to bribe them Rs 20 or 30 on some days.<sup>1</sup> The women were often suspected by local residents of tipping off their husbands resulting in local robberies and kidnapping. Late in the evening they return home with bundles of clothes and unsold *bartan*, to cook for their families and do the household chores.

The poorest families live hand to mouth, unable to amass clothing or *bartan*, with no access to running water to wash garments, no sewing machines or space to mend clothing, constantly begging every day for more credit at the *bartan* shop. Hajkumadri, a stainless steel dealer, displayed his account book, where all the local women's credit and repayments were recorded. He claimed that most women would try to buy a daily minimum of Rs 100-150 worth of steel as stock from him, using the money just received from the market, depending on how much they had left at home. There are over one hundred and sixty steel dealers in the area, and some women run up accounts with several at a time. The better the quality of steel (and plastic) available to the suburban housewife and the wider range of utensils on offer, the more attracted she will be to stop on the roadside, and the more likely a garment dealer would obtain good quality clothing in return. Each piece is therefore aggressively scrutinised in the *bartan* shop for dents, scratches and ill-fitting lids before being purchased by the *bartanwale*. Hajkumadri estimated that women would get perhaps Rs 250 worth of clothing for a *bartan* worth Rs 100, but the *bartanwale* consistently claimed the returns were much less.

At dawn, the Ghora Mandi is full of women sitting cross-legged on the ground in rows. The buyers are all men, trawling up and down, singing out what they are looking for, bargaining for pieces, trying to evade the women thrusting unwanted items into their paths. Along the crowded pavements outside rows of men stand cleaning their teeth with *neem* twigs, drinking cups of tea and hawking. Music blares out across the market from the adjacent temple loudspeakers every morning, and a constant commentary announces the name of each dealer who donates a small sum as they leave. With arms draped full of clothes and more bundled up, the buyers eventually depart the frenzied market, clambering into rickshaws piled high with purchases, or trudging off down the road. This is the node of what is probably the largest

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used-clothing market in the subcontinent. Approximately 1000 to 1,500 dealers enter the market on any day, depending on religious festivals and the season. Sucking in unwanted clothing bartered across the country, the market re-energises the latent value of cloth, it filters and sorts it, and acts as a powerful centrifugal force, ejecting tens of thousands of items every day.

One group of *bartanwale* made a trip to Agra, where the *pheriya* trade was far less developed. A few extended families got together to hire a big Tata truck, piling the open back high with huge baskets of *bartan* (worth Rs 70,000), children, bedrolls and stoves. Staying in a temple *dharamsala* (guesthouse), they would scour the better off districts for clothing, returning several days later laden with garments. On a smaller scale, traders from the areas outside Delhi would also make weekly or even monthly trips to the Ghora Mandi with their bundles of clothing, hoping to find an urban market for items less desirable in the neighbouring rural areas. The *bartanwale*'s willingness to travel keeps different styles of clothing in circulation, maximising the chance of selling them on for the best return where they are desired the most.

### **Buyers and Dealers**

The women in the marketplace usually have between 50 and 100 garments in front of them; they always sell their own, as they alone know exactly what they paid for them in stainless steel, and what they must get in return. They try to attract the buyers' attention as they walk past. The buyers in the market are usually men, from families who have struggled up to the next rung of the economic ladder, and whose work is adding value to the particular type of clothing they buy before selling them on. Such operators are highly strategic, seizing opportunities as they arise and maximising new niches in the market through personal contacts and sheer hard work. The possibilities for expansion depend upon business acumen, a willingness to take risks and forego immediate returns. A crucial factor is the materiality of the cloth itself, which determines the uses to which they can be put, reflected in their price. The relative values of types of clothes are described below; each material has a fairly



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established trajectory, but newcomers are constantly attempting to add to the options available and gain the edge over their competitors.

The easiest level to begin trading at is that in old cotton saris and *dhotis*. Most *bartanwale* have one or two old pieces in each transaction which cannot be mended and whose value lies in the softness and absorbency of the natural fibres, which makes them suitable for rags, dusters and polishing cloths. A six-yard sari can become six one square yard polishing cloths for the machine industry; *dhotis* are torn into three pieces, while shirts become smaller dusters. These are then sold on to hardware shops, factories and the machining industries. Petty traders need invest little: Gautam bought a few *dhotis* every day for Rs 2 to 3 each, which he tore up into strips and sold as dusters to a local factory for Rs 3 to 4 each, earning a few paise profit on each one (100 paise = 1 Rs).

There are over a hundred wholesale rag dealers in the area. They often act as middlemen themselves, selling on to others who have large *godowns* (warehouses) stocked to fill larger contracts in the international rag market. Strips of old clothing are graded by the middlemen into bundles depending on fabric strength, size and fibres, the highest quality ensuring maximum absorbency and minimum shedding of lint. The biggest players in the market buy up rags from as far afield as Calcutta, Madras, Andhra and Gujarat, exporting container loads to the Middle East and beyond. Delhi is claimed to be a major centre in the world-wide rag market, turning familiar personal clothing into wipes for paint factories and machine tooling workshops across the globe, all expedited via the *bartan* trade.

The most common use for the goods at the Ghora Mandi is as clothing for those unable to afford either new garments in the shops or the imported second-hand clothing available in the local markets. Small dealers specialise in particular garments, depending upon the resources at their disposal to make the items worth more through washing and mending. Raghbir was a typical buyer. Travelling ten kilometres every morning to the market, he bought up to seventy-five old saris every day, which he took home for his wife to wash and darn. He chose mainly synthetic ones, occasionally artificial silk (with no borders), and sold them every Sunday at the Lal Qila (Red Fort), making Rs 3 to 5 profit on each one.

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A large part of the market deals in *shalwar kamiz*; especially favoured are the synthetic suits which last longer and are easier to maintain. They are often in better condition, not faded but still bright. With both saris and suits, the range of colours, styles and fashions is enormous. A jeans dealer was apparently making a higher profit buying for Rs 5 to 10, washing and ironing them and selling them on for double. Another man dealt in old shirts, buying them for Rs 6 or 7 each, while his wife washed and repaired them. He then sold them on for Rs 8 to 10. With a high turnover of 150 - 200 shirts a week, the family could make up to Rs 2,000 a month. Profits per garment are low, less than Rs 3, but the harder wives and daughters in the household work, the higher the turnover.

The buyers will be able to sell on desirable clothing to their customers for a good profit, capitalising on the fact that end-users can buy much better quality outfits second-hand than they would ever have afforded new. Although most end-users will be the poor, it was often suggested that lower middle-class women might buy them on the quiet, perhaps claiming they were hand-me downs from a relative to enquirers. Lemire (1988) also writes about the need for good second-hand clothing for the working classes of pre-industrial England, who could not afford clothing in the period before large-scale production made 'brand new' clothes affordable. In Indian markets, better quality used garments from middle-class households may offer better value in terms of economic cost, status and quality than poorly made new garments.

Most of this clothing is then resold in the large Sunday Markets found across north India. Behind the Lal Qila in Delhi is a long established flea market, the Chor Bazaar. Rubbish dealers, the *kabariwale*, spread their treasures out on the ground: a mixture of old watches, clocks, household utensils, old furniture, scrap metal and books. At the far end of the market a couple of hundred Waghri men and women sit on tarpaulins on the ground behind piles of washed, ironed and neatly folded clothes. While sellers might try to attract the attention of passers by through calling out, it requires some effort to scrutinise the folded clothing, and this part of the market is noticeably quieter than the rest. Although a few daring, middle-class bargain hunters might visit the *kabari* market for amusement, they never venture to the end of

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the wasteland where the Waghri sit. Here, the clothes are only ever bought by the poor, the low-paid maids, rickshaw drivers and unskilled labourers in the city. A few Waghri sell used Indian clothing at the weekly *haat*, suburban markets. Second-hand markets are also found around the old railway station next to Shahjahanabad, in Paharganj, the Qutub Road, and older parts of the city where recent immigrants have always arrived, akin to those found in London's East End.

At 3.00 am every morning, the most valuable saris are changing hands in the Ghora Mandi. Women place silk saris and those with decorative *zari* borders on the top of their heaps, shining in the half-light, and the earliest buyers are those snapping them up. Prices vary according to the area of decorative surface, and the amount of gold and silver used in the *kinari* (borders) and *pallu* (the decorative end-piece). One or two buyers call out for real gold and silver, paying a few hundred Rupees for them and later taking them down to the *kinari* bazaar (borders' market) to be sold separately or burnt for their metal content. The usual purpose of unwanted silk (and good quality artificial silk) saris is as a raw material to be re-fashioned into soft furnishings and tailored clothing for the Western market.

All of the buyers are middlemen, building up stocks in their homes around the periphery of the market to fulfil contracts with large manufacturers or selling on directly to the family businesses in the neighbouring district that transform them (Fig.2). Although each *bartanwali* claims to rarely receive the finest silk saris for pots, common estimates suggest that at least 10,000 people go out on *pheriya* every day, so there are always some available. These garments are of the types that are often given as part of a trousseau or as significant ritual gifts to be worn for functions. They are usually high quality, but irreparably stained. When originally bought they can cost from a few hundred to several thousand Rupees; one buyer suggested that a Rs 2,000 sari probably sells in the Ghora Mandi for about Rs 100, five percent of its original price.

The buyers in the Ghora Mandi tend to earn profits in the region of Rs 15 to 25 per silk sari if they sell them on in bulk, although some highly prized individual pieces would fetch more. Few lower level dealers specialise in types within the general category of 'silk saris', and

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houses bulge with multi-coloured bundles of saris in every style: satins, *tanchois*, tissues, tie-dyed *bandhini*, Benarasi brocades and south Indian silks. One or two have found niche markets for particular types. A Muslim trader specialised in printed silk saris which he sold to a manufacturer. Those with the tiniest floral sprig were worth up to Rs 100 each, whereas larger patterns fetched only Rs 50 to 60, being less versatile for pattern cutters to make new products from. He bought three to four hundred a month from the market and other dealers.

The most successful dealers are those who have acquired influence and control in a variety of interconnected fields, eliminating the middlemen. Sushil was in his early twenties and beginning to deal in silk saris. Keen to meet tourists with whom he could deal directly, but who rarely found their way to north west Delhi, his house was full of the most gorgeous silk saris, many of which he offered for several hundred Rupees each. Through family contacts, he claimed to bypass the local Ghora Mandi and obtain clothing directly from dealers across Rajasthan, extolling the quality and beauty of saris formerly belonging to the royal princesses of minor desert courts. His father was the President of the *Bartan* Trader's Association, and a prominent member of both the local *panchayat* (community council) and the Ghora Mandir (temple) administration, so the family had influence and contacts in every sphere of business undertaken in the district. Sushil was making a name for himself as a dealer and *bartanwale* came to him directly.

## **Transformations**

A short cycle rickshaw ride away from the Ghora Mandi, the neighbouring suburb is a definite rung up the ladder of success. The area is modestly prosperous, comfortable, lower middle-class in character. The traders are all Gujarati Waghri, who have been developing the business of recycling Gujarati embroidery since Independence. Tarlo documents the manner in which embroidery was traded for *bartan* across the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan, and sold to collectors and foreign tourists (Tarlo 1996b).

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The Delhi community of the Waghris is part of this network of dealers and manufacturers that extends across west and north India. Many dealers are primarily still using new and old Gujarati embroidery to make cushion covers, bedspreads and wall hangings made from scraps of embroidered clothing for the export market. The whole extended family is usually involved in manufacturing, and many employ several tailors on a piece-work basis. In the last fifteen to twenty years, these manufacturers have turned from primarily using Gujarati embroidery to the growing abundance of decorated saris to be found in the nearby Ghora Mandi, creating an extended repertoire of designs for soft furnishings, each constructed according to certain sari styles.

Silk saris are cut up into pieces, according to their basic construction: the top and bottom borders (about five yards long), the decorated end, *pallu*, and the central field, often containing regularly repeated motifs. The type of construction, weave and texture is considered, along with whether borders are striped or tapestry woven with motifs and whether design elements in the *pallu* and field are small and repetitive or big and bold. Although the saris have initially been selected for their material properties of silkiness and *zari* content, it is the particular combination of design elements used in each type of sari which becomes a determining factor in their reuse.

Coarse black backing fabric is cut to the desired size and pieces of sari are laid out over it in a design. Benarasi brocades are most commonly used, as they tend to have bold *zari* borders with definite stripes, heavily patterned *pallu* in *zari*, and regularly recurring flower *butti* (motifs), animals and geometric shapes in the field. The remaining, plainer silk parts of the sari may be sold to others to be made up into scarves (*chuni* and headsquares), used as lining material in recycled clothing, or if in poor condition sold for scrap (*chindi*, *katran*) to the local rag merchants. Cushion covers and bedspreads are made up of a patchwork of these elements stitched together on cotton backing. A popular design is of a series of concentric bands of sari borders around a central square, laid down diagonally within the square or rectangle of the object. Borders of different colours and *zari* patterns are mixed together to create dazzling effects.

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These traders are now the main manufacturers of these products in north India. The Ghora Mandi cannot supply enough silk saris to meet demand, and so the traders have capitalised on extensive networks across north India to buy up more raw materials, and sell on their finished products. Ashok Kumar was one such trader, who has buyers working for him in second-hand markets in Ahmedabad, Bombay, Surat and Benaras. The latter are both centres of production, and good sources for *zari* sari borders. Smaller traders in small- and medium-sized towns across India sell on their used clothing to middlemen, who lug heavy bundles of second-hand silk saris across the Indian rail network in bulging carriages to reach the major cities, and finally Delhi. There they are made up and sold back to traders in tourist destinations such as Goa, Bombay, Jaipur and Agra, and exported to Nepal and beyond. In Delhi as elsewhere, petty traders, usually Waghri, sell a few cushion covers outside the main attractions, and peddle them on the main streets such as Janpath and Connaught Place, while shopkeepers make a living in the poorer parts of town such as Paharganj selling them as souvenirs to backpackers. One dealer suggested that a sari cushion cover might wholesale for Rs 20 to 25, but tourists on Janpath might pay from Rs 50 to 60; however, new visitors unwilling to bargain probably part with many times that amount.

These products are ubiquitous, on offer to foreign tourists wherever they are to be found across India and south Asia as a whole, and they are now being imported in vast quantities into the West by entrepreneurial Western travellers-turned-traders. Sold through 'ethnic' trading shops, market stalls and festivals, these items have become hugely popular, although few end buyers realise they are essentially recycled goods. The entrepreneurial necessity of manufacturing goods from recycled materials is sold onto customers as age-old authenticity if mentioned at all.

In the UK, cushion covers can be priced from £15 for these cheaper versions, and often significantly more. In 2001, a double bedspread was on sale in Glastonbury for £195. As with many products fortuitously developed to recycle available cheap resources, the supplier of recycled sari cushions relies on what is available *ad hoc*, and the saris, brought in by the Waghri traders, constantly exercise their creativity. The overall style of 'Indian' ethnic sari product is now well defined, and the potential of design elements in various types of saris are

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understood and exploited through forms such as patchwork and stripes by their producers. However, each of these pieces is a unique combination of original materials that cannot be exactly replicated.

The recent fashion for Indian furnishings has led low- to middle-market UK high street chain stores to sell 'sari cushions', featuring identical diagonally striped designs, originally developed according to the re-use of sari borders. However, large retailers in the West such as Pier One cannot rely on serendipity and happenstance: they need to be able to guarantee consistent quality, and large quantities of similar, if not identical, colours and designs to fit in with their seasonal marketing strategies, catalogues and displays. It would appear that new sari borders are bought in bulk, perhaps even commissioned, and made up to copy the 'original' recycled product, guaranteeing thousands of cushion covers that have no tears or pulled threads, and no chance of a surreptitiously hidden stain in a corner. The catalogue *the Pier* described their 'sari cushions' as 'made from Indian sari borders...made from individual pieces of fabric; patterns may vary' (*the Pier* catalogue 2001). Each was priced at £29.95.

The aesthetics of patchwork and quilting as a recycling practice and the object forms chosen, such as cushions, throws and covers, have for long been common to Indian and Western culture. However, a more radical transformation of silk saris is involved in their being remade into Western fashion garments, a subject that cannot be covered here. At the lower end of the market, such clothing has been available for budget travellers in tourist destinations for decades, developed as a hybrid product between local manufacturers and foreigners wanting cheap garments that used exotic materials to create western styles.

## **Conclusion**

The decision to get rid of unwanted garments in the wardrobe creates exchange value. This was often referred to by middle-class women as the joys of getting 'something for nothing'. By removing the body from clothing and detaching it from the person, clothing is immediately transformed into cloth, a new resource to be utilised. Clothing must become rubbish in order for such transformations to be successful; their conversion into new

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consumer goods with high value depends on their being largely conducted in secret, enabling them to move between regimes of value. The materiality of cloth is crucial to processes of recycling and the creation of value through its vulnerability to destructive actions such as cutting and remaking. The agency of the material object combines with the resourcefulness of the entrepreneurial dealers to create global networks of hybrid people and fabrics.

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<sup>1</sup> During the period of fieldwork between July 1999 and June 2000, £1 was worth approximately 67 to 70 Rs (Indian Rupees).

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## **Figures.**

1. The local *bartanwale* sitting on the footpath.
2. Stockpiling silk saris in a wealthy dealer's house.