
SHEDDING SKINS

The Materiality of Divestment in India

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Abstract

This article calls for a reconsideration of the materiality of things in dynamic processes of self-making and personhood. Grounded in research in contemporary urban India, it is argued that it is in the act of divestment that the capacity for the recreation of the self is made most apparent, due to the intimate connection between clothing and the body. Cloth is also a vital element of gift-giving and the re-creation of social networks. The case study of a woman trying to get rid of an unwanted garment highlights the options available and the different regimes of value by which the worth of used clothing can be assessed. These include handing on treasured pieces to family members, recycling within the home, giving to servants, bartering them for new stainless steel pots or burning them for their silver and gold content. The sacrifice and destruction of such intimate objects are the necessary prerequisite for the renewal of self within a network of mutually constitutive person-object relations.

Key Words ◆ clothing ◆ materiality ◆ personhood ◆ recycling ◆ value

INTRODUCTION

In this article I am going to recount a case study concerning the problems faced by one elderly Indian woman to get rid of an unwanted garment. The example focuses upon strategies of divestment as an ontological resource, highlighting the constitutional role of material things in dynamic processes of self-making and personhood and the creation of value. This approach forms part of a larger study of the contemporary

life-cycle of clothing in India. Beginning with the acquisition of clothing, its use, reuse, storage and eventual discarding were investigated in their social and material contexts amongst the middle classes in New Delhi. My research subsequently followed the recycling of clothing across north India, as it is commodified and moves through the second-hand trade across the continent, which remains near invisible to the urban middle classes from whom it was obtained. These markets are overflowing with bundles of old saris, torn *dhotis* and tatty *salwar kamiz* (long shirt and trousers), for which traders create ever more niche markets through small-scale entrepreneurial practices and complex networks of familial relations, middlemen and exporters. Whilst the bulk of usable clothing is sold on to the poor at Sunday markets, rags of soft cotton cloth are shipped by the container-load across the world for use as machine-tool wipers. The most prized items are silk saris with decorative borders and end-pieces (*pallu*), traditionally part of a middle-class trousseau, which are transformed into soft furnishings and new clothes for the western market: skirts, shorts, jackets and halter-neck bra tops.

Complimenting recent work on second-hand clothing such as the illuminating study of the transformation of imported western clothing into Zambia (Hansen, 2000) and the delving into marginal spaces where heaps of unwanted garments are bought and sold in Great Britain (Clarke, 2000; Gregson and Crewe, 2003), this study begins with strategies of divestment and works outwards from the domestic space, thus significantly extending earlier work on clothing and cloth as a resource. The act of riddance itself can be seen as a pivotal moment between the evaluation of clothing as a crucial part of self-construction and the recognition that through its sacrifice and subsequent transformation into cloth as stuff, a person creates a new thing, replete with exchange value. Such a process is inextricably bound up with the materiality of cloth, its fragility, impermanence and susceptibility to decay, demanding a continuous evaluation of its role and worth.

The efficacy of clothing as a mediator of identities has been well documented by Tarlo (1996) for the contemporary Indian context, revealing complex cultural perceptions of dress when worn on the body. Such carefully constructed images are continually manipulated according to changing social arenas, accentuating or confounding common expectations depending on the inhabitant's desire and ability. Clothing is not only a tool in the daily creation of surface projection into the world. It plays a central role in the cycles of gifts and counter-gifts, which mark both life-cycle ceremonies and the seasonal and religious festival calendars. For women, the key moment of acquisition of clothing is the trousseau given to her by her parents, augmented by her new in-laws. Children often wear hand-me-downs from siblings and cousins, and thrifty reuse is admired as a moral virtue. Marriage represents the point

at which a woman becomes a full social adult, and all her clothes should be new.

The middle-class trousseau comprises a large quantity of rich saris in silks and cottons, with a wide variety of decorative styles and designs typical of regions from across the country resulting in a 'pan-Indian' wardrobe. Indeed, Appadurai has commented on the way the Indian middle classes have used food to develop a national cuisine through the inclusion of regional specialities (1988), while Pinney draws the analogy between food and clothing: 'edibility and wearability stand as parallel idioms of national integration' (1993: 119). In this light, the contemporary wardrobe becomes a transcendent entity that represents a cultural kaleidoscope conveying a sense of 'unity in diversity'.

In addition, a new bride may have a variety of *salwar kamiz* for everyday wear, although many in-laws remain firm that she should only wear saris for the first few years of marriage. It is important that married women dress up in their finest clothes for all important social occasions, and women have sharp memories for detail. New clothes are customarily given and worn for all of the major religious festivals. The desire for new clothes and the wear and tear of older garments are interlocking facets of the web of ties that bind people through such continuous gifting and wearing, wrapping each other in cloths that entangle them in networks of social relations. Just as new cloth decays and needs reinforcing or replacement, social networks require continuous renewal, adapting and changing over time. A woman's wardrobe can be understood as a container of such cloth relations, each representing interaction with others, and recalling moments in time and space. Some items are treasured souvenirs, others are unwanted gifts never worn; over time, women can become detached from older pieces lacking sentimental value: the wardrobe becomes a nascent collection with its own logical relationships between elements, to which new pieces are added and others are expelled (Stewart, 1993).

Women, as the managers of the family wardrobe, have an intimate knowledge of its contents through routine acts of maintenance and care; throughout their lifetimes they sort through piles of clothing, washing and folding, constantly making decisions about the status of each. At every stage, some are rejected as too faded, stretched, or stained; others are the wrong shade, have become unfashionable or no longer fit around an expanded figure; still others represent unwanted relationships with their donors and conjure up unpleasant memories. In orthodox Hindu thought, the material world is perceived to be ultimately an illusion, *Maya*; as men and women grow older, their ties to their family, friends and the wider world are loosened, and they begin to renounce their entanglement within the web of relationships between people and things. As women age and become grandmothers, the rate of riddance often increases, but

the desire to find the best option for each piece can lead to protracted procrastination and worry until the right solution presents itself.

PRIYA'S WAISTCOAT

Priya lives in an apartment block in a newly developed housing society across the river in East Delhi. She is a widow in her 80s, and used to live in a well-to-do suburb in South Delhi until the expense proved too great. A trained artist, she is known for her highly unusual and beautifully coordinated clothes, which are characteristically asymmetrical in pattern and do not 'match' in the conventional Indian sense. Looking through old family photographs, she remembered that as a teenager she had already started to wear her own individual style of dress, even before her marriage in the late 1930s. In the pictures she wears the small fitted waistcoats which were to become her trademark. These were worn on top of her *choli* blouse, with the end of her sari draped over the top. Nowadays she combines them with *salwar kamiz*. Her two favourite waistcoats were both extremely fine quality trousseau items: a black velvet one from her sister which she still wears every winter, and a salmon pink silk one from her parents. The silk is figured with flowers and leaves woven with silver thread, in the 'heavy' Benarasi brocade style. It is an unusual garment, which has been a highly prized item of clothing in Priya's wardrobe for over 60 years.

However, this old waistcoat is now past its best. It is stained with sweat on the inside, and has torn along the weft in several places, as a result of continuous wearing and folding. It is frayed around the edges, and looks generally tatty, past repairing. Priya is an old lady, and is trying to divest herself of unnecessary items at the end of her life: the problem of what to do with this garment niggled her occasionally as she tried to rationalize her wardrobe. Although it had great sentimental value to her, it could not be accorded the privileged status due to a treasured wedding sari for example, nor could it be handed on as a wearable garment to her family.

There is a widespread cultural belief in India in the capacity of material things to absorb and transmit the essence of people and places with which they have previously come into contact, as part of a more encompassing, profound cognitive system of reasoning (see Khare, 1993). Bayly has termed this essence 'bio-moral substance', and illustrated how susceptible cloth is to conveying it through its material properties such as denseness of weave, softness, colour, absorbency and impermanence (Bayly, 1986). When given cloth, the recipients may believe themselves to be transformed both materially and morally, hence the handing on of cloth can be ambiguous, potentially resulting in the transference of morally desirable essence or dangerous pollution.

Using its positive associations is commonplace in the clothing of babies and small children. Clothing from auspicious older relations or respected family friends is used to make nappies and baby quilts for the new-born; usually soft white saris and dhotis, they protect the young from harm and the evil eye, and may be used to treat sickness in a small child. Torn or stained favourite old silk saris are often cut up and lovingly remade into children's party clothes, which are then worn to large family gatherings where the clothing's genealogy is commented upon, almost alongside the child's. Such domestic recycling brings children into the family fold by wrapping them in the clothing of a loved one. In addition, many women instruct local tailors precisely how to chop up a sari and transform it into *shalwar kamiz* sets, using the sari borders and ends as a decorative resource. The shedding of clothing through handing on amongst family members is reminiscent of Gell's distributed personhood, where he uses the analogy of a person shedding skins like the layers of an onion, which reveal no core but simply an endless succession of layers (Gell, 1998). Thus the materiality of cloth breaks down the perceived boundaries between self and the world, and as endlessly shed, can be used as a new resource to re-tie connections with others whilst renewing the self.

Cloth is above all associated with the body, often termed a second skin; divested clothing, especially that worn next to the skin may be classified alongside other things with a strong personal connection such as bodily exuviae (nail clippings and hair). The exuviae of children in particular are often disposed of carefully, as are those from people in a weakened state. The domestic practices of patchwork and the quilting of old cloths are simultaneously an expression of everyday thrift and a conservation of morally valuable bodily indexes. The fabric is usually worn and threadbare, and salvageable pieces are cut out to make new elements. Beyond this, the bringing together of pieces from different family members, perhaps geographically dispersed or from many generations, results in the creation of a new wholeness from fractured parts, reorganizing the spatio-temporal relationships inherent in the cloth itself.¹ As Stallybrass has commented: 'A network of cloth can trace the connections of love across the boundaries of absence, of death, because cloth is able to carry absent body, memory, genealogy, as well as literal material value' (Stallybrass, 1993).

But in Priya's example, the tiny waistcoat contained little fabric – she had no inclination to make it into smaller domestic items, and neither had her only daughter-in-law, a successful lawyer in America. The most usual course of action is to pass clothes on to household servants, who often demand clothing as part of unofficial wages and informal gifts. This practice highlights the ambiguity of such relationships, at once creating hierarchy through the disposal of waste, yet

bringing servants into the domestic fold through wrapping them in familial garb. Women are therefore extremely strategic about both the quality and quantity of clothing they are prepared to hand on to each servant, never simply acquiescing to their requests, but recognizing their right to a certain amount.

Such causes of concern over the minutiae of giving highlight the wider ambiguities of the mistress–maid relationship. Adams and Dickey (2000) point out that the 'domestic' is related to, but not contained by, the physical boundaries of the home, it is a site of production of societal power structures. The 'domestic' refers not only to the space, but also the meaningful practices which take place there, leading to questions concerning the nature of membership of a household, the ambiguity of servants being 'ours/not ours', and what is private and what is not. The hegemony of the home is an instrumental, ambiguous hegemony, constructing inequality, domination and resistance. Employers and workers interactively construct opposing identities out of their experiences with one another. 'Such identities are necessarily fluid, positioned and contingent. They are continuously negotiated and constructed in tandem through we–they contrasts' (Adams and Dickey, 2000: 2). These relationships need constant rejuvenation, modification and fortification.

Many middle-class households save up unwanted clothing during the year to distribute to dependants and poorer relations in their natal villages. Struggling with heavy suitcases, they transport them across the continent on long rail journeys. Some do give to charities run by ashrams or local figures, but the fear of corruption is strong, that clothing will be diverted from the poor and sold for profit, and most prefer face-to-face giving to the intended wearers of their clothes. Priya had tried to give the waistcoat to her maidservant, but was upset to find that it was refused – torn and dirty the maid said she had no use for it. Most women balk at giving away old silk saris outside the family. Once valuable additions to the wardrobe, often with much sentimental significance, women often complained of what to do with these clothes that are 'too good for the maid'. This indicates an unease at boundaries being overstepped, of the fear of a maid's social position being mistaken as that of an equal (see also Lemire, 1997 for a similar fear in 19th-century Britain). There is also the thrifty attitude that the perceived value inherent in such clothing ought to be somehow kept within the family.

Priya thought about approaching the *bartanwale*, (literally 'the people who deal in utensils'), those who exchange kitchen pots and pans for old clothes (Norris, 2004). Many upper-middle-class informants claimed that they would never get rid of their clothes in this way, implying that it was demeaning to want a return for one's cast-offs. Yet I later discovered that most women did this at some time or another, especially those whose household budgets were stretched. Those that said they had done so had

often been younger wives, perhaps living in extended families, with higher concerns of thrift and less autonomy to spend what is perceived as 'pin' money. One neighbour, who lived in a joint family, described how her mother-in-law ran a thrifty household, and they are always trying not to waste anything (see Gudeman and Rivera, 1990). If they needed a bucket or a *bartan*, they would sort out their old, damaged cotton saris or ones they were bored with, and pool them for bartering.

The *bartanwale* are Waghri people from Gujarat, and suffer from an extremely poor reputation, as might be expected for dealers in waste, whose moral character is often identified with the materiality of their trade. I was repeatedly told that they were dangerous people, untrustworthy, and that allowing them into one's home was unthinkable – the women were known to be merely 'casing the joint' for a return visit by their husbands, branded as thieves and criminals. The initial approach is made out on the street. During the day, as the local residents walk up the road past the fruit and vegetable sellers' carts, they are likely to pass the *bartanwale* sitting on the footpath under a tree. On the road a few feet in front of them is a dazzling display of shining *bartan*, stainless steel plates, bowls, and various cooking pots and pans. In addition there may be glass tableware, such as the moulded serving bowls with floral designs, sparkling in the sunlight. And at one side, a range of plastic bowls and tubs in bright candy-striped colours completes the tempting tableau.

The women make no attempt to call out and encourage women to stop, but allow the glinting surfaces to attract potential customers. The *bartanwale* then ask what items the woman has at home to dispose of. Primarily, the trade is in clothing, although some old electrical goods, shoes and wristwatches and so on are increasingly sought after. Once the quality and desirability of the old things are established in principle, a tentative ratio is established, for example '6 cotton *dhotis* for each metal beaker', with the understanding that the real bargaining will commence when the clothes are viewed. If a particular desired item is not on display, the dealer can arrange to bring one later. Once the woman's interest is aroused, she arranges for the *bartanwale* to visit her home. She may have her heart set on a particular piece, such as a new bowl, or she may have an excess of clothing piling up – whichever the trigger, the shining display is a means of luring her old clothes out of their marginal spaces and into the marketplace. There is a sort of stickiness to the relationship women have with their clothing, which necessitates smoothing the path of divestment.

THE LURE OF POTS

Itinerant merchants trading brass and copper pots have long been a feature of Indian rural life where small villages did not support a resident

craftsman (Miller, 1985: 23). The custom of trading pieces of peasant trousseau embroidery for pots has been described by Tarlo in Gujarat, where it was begun by entrepreneurial *pheriya* (wandering traders) in the 1950s (1996a). Interest in peasant embroidery had been sparked in Bombay after its use as a costume in a Raj Kumar film. At that time in rural Kutch, peasant women's embroidery had no commodity value in the local market as clothing styles were regionally and caste specific, but when sold in Bombay to a new market of Indian artists and foreign collectors beyond the museum world *cognoscenti*, it had started to acquire a high value. 'Obtaining stocks was easy because women would part with their embroidery for petty exchanges of *bidis* (local cigarettes), grain or a new kitchen utensil' (Tarlo, 1996a).

Tarlo's research suggested that the most important motivation for women to sell their embroidery was changing sartorial styles at a local level, and that elite peasant families sold off large quantities of trousseau items for a single steel plate back in the 1960s. Economic desperation was a motivating factor in times of famine, but otherwise only applied to the very poorest levels of peasant society, where money or grain would have been gratefully bartered for. New embroidery styles were favoured instead, coupled with the increasing fashion for wearing mill-made saris. Tarlo mentions the attraction of the steel utensils as a factor, replacing the valued brass pots that were laborious to clean with shiny stainless steel, nicknamed 'German Silver'. She notes that the exchange of embroidery for stainless steel began as an exchange of exotica (Tarlo, 1996a).

Tens of thousands of *Waghri* now earn a regular living trading in used clothing. Although the principal items exchanged can no longer be termed as 'exotic' to either party, new items such as recently introduced ranges of moulded glassware are popular. What is of interest here is why a regionally specific trade could be adapted so successfully to provide a suitable conduit for clothing to leave the wardrobe of the average middle-class urban woman and to enter the marketplace. Shining kitchen utensils take pride of place in most Indian kitchens, and the Gujaratis in particular are well known for their custom of *mand*, the display of polished copper and steel pots set up high on shelves (Jain, 1981). Spare money is often invested in utensils; they mark status and are symbols of family wealth. Like jewellery, they are portable and can be melted down to be reformed or sold in times of need. Collections of *bartan* grow over time and are given as dowries to daughters, including brass or copper utensils. Indeed, the major dowry items for a new bride would consist of a trousseau of embroidered clothing and furnishings and a collection of utensils, together with a few pieces of household furniture. Jain also notes that there was the custom to give *bartan* at ceremonies for a child's birth, the ceremony of tying the sacred thread, at weddings and commemorative occasions after death. Utensils are distributed as gifts

to caste members and sometimes gifted when returning from a pilgrimage – details of the journey were engraved upon the pot (1981).

However, the appreciation of gleaming pots is not confined to Gujarat, and has been commented on extensively in the literature (e.g. Coomaraswamy, 1909). Today, most women have a good collection of steel plates and pots that they use on a daily basis. Although they may not be usually arranged as a display in such a self-conscious manner as *mand*, pots are often artfully placed in sets and in size order on open kitchen shelving, and the steel drainage racks fitted to kitchen walls are in themselves decorative features.

Amongst the Delhi housewives, many claimed that they loved to add to their collections, though often could not justify spending household money on them. There is a popular male perception that women find it hard to stop themselves from buying pots, both clay vessels and metal containers; the day before Diwali, a women's festival celebrates the acquisition of new pots for the coming new year, and stalls are set up around the market. Certainly, such pots are an essential part of the dowry, where the trousseau and pots are the principal goods a bride takes to her new home.

The unwanted, disintegrating old clothing, itself a result of continuous gifting between family members and kin, is replaced by more durable pots, both pertaining to the female domestic economy. Pots evoke bodily metaphors; just as clothes are a skin, pots are representations of the womb (Gell, 1986). Both could be symbolically conceived of as dynamic generative containers of the self, but whereas one is impermanent and fragile and must be cast aside, the replacement is durable and permanent; the sacrifice of old clothing allows for a renewal of self and the acquisition of a more permanent addition to the family economy, located in the kitchen, the spiritual heart of the home. In this sense, old clothing can be understood as *jutha*, or polluted leftovers, which are expelled from the house via the despised traders, in return for the receipt of materially pure metal pots.

One Delhi friend had used the *bartanwale* before, but had felt cheated and exhausted afterwards. 'Once the exchange begins, they keep demanding more and more things, until you end up giving away things you wanted to keep, all for the sake of one or two *bartan* which you could have bought in the shop'. She acknowledged that they had the advantage, as they know 'you don't want the clothes, but you could get something nice for the kitchen, rather than fritter the household money away'.

Priya was reluctant to ask them into her house as she had not done this before and was nervous of their reputation as fearsome crooks. She said she did not know what value to expect for her waistcoat, but wanted to get a non-stick *karahi* (fryingpan) for it – seemingly on the basis that this (semi-) luxury item was what she really wanted in her kitchen. Such

a utensil would, however, be available in the local shop for perhaps Rs 200–300, depending on the quality of the brand. Uma, another friend offered to do the bargaining for her in her flat, as she had dealt with them before. Uma therefore made an appointment for the next day.

The *bartanwali* was a young girl called Mira, who looked distinctly disappointed by the waistcoat and offered only Rs 50. Uma was surprised. A half-hearted, nervous bargaining began: the fineness of the *zari* work was pointed out. Mira was unimpressed, and said that there was no market for this. The old clothing was sold on to the poor, and poorer people could not afford to pay extra for handmade *zari* silver work. She claimed no knowledge of the value inherent in the silver thread or the trade in metal thread. Indeed, she counteracted that if the piece had been made of synthetic *zari* it would have been worth more to her. It would have been shiny, lasted longer, and easier to keep. Also the fact that it is a waistcoat deters from its value – perhaps a bit of real *zari* on a suit or sari would have given value, but no-one can afford the luxury of a tatty waistcoat that does not actually clothe you properly. Uma then spoke of getting it invisibly mended to see if that would increase its value, but Mira said no. Uma did not really know what the second-hand value of the garment was, which undermined her confidence.

Bearing in mind that Priya now had her heart set on a new modern fryingpan, a long discussion ensued about what size and quality could be had, but Mira would not even give one *bartan* for this waistcoat alone, and asked if they had anything else they wanted to get rid of as well. When Priya discovered via a phone call that she would not even get the fryingpan unless she had something else to trade, she was extremely upset and, in tears, cried 'just throw it away'. At that point it was suggested that Uma and I would try to sell it for the silver content ourselves, and Mira left empty handed.

Priya could not think of anyone else to give it to. She seems to have thought the waistcoat was all but worthless, until an acquaintance in the housing society suggested that she might be able to get something for it if she sold it for its silver content. Apparently, Priya was then interested to 'make something from it', and gave it to the woman who said she went to the goldsmiths in Old Delhi often to deal in jewellery. The figure of Rs 300 was mentioned, however six months later nothing had been done about it so Priya asked for it back.

Eventually, Uma and I made the journey into the narrow lanes in Shahjahanabad, Old Delhi, where gold and silversmiths have traded for centuries. Amongst the antique jewellery dealers, traders in wedding ornaments, and bangle makers, are workshops selling rings, necklaces and bracelets fresh from the small hearths tucked away in the back. Near here are two small hole-in-the-wall shops, one with a tatty old *khagra* skirt with *zari* work hung up outside as an advertisement. They contain

large old balance scales, a hearth, tongs and crucibles, and all the paraphernalia for burning clothing, leaving strips of blackened silver wire to be chemically transformed into tiny new beads of shining metal. This in turn is sold on to the families nearby who continue to manufacture *zari* thread by hand. Taking out Priya's waistcoat, it was weighed in the scales and percentage of silver thread calculated. We were offered Rs 250 by one and Rs 300 by the other, destruction being the most profitable means of recycling this garment.

CONCLUSION

The richness of detail recounted in this story forces us to consider how we relate to objects through their materiality. At the outset, I designed my fieldwork to trace the 'cultural biography of things' (Kopytoff, 1986). But the detailed focus on the clothing resulted in an overturning of the notion of 'a personified object' onto which ideas are grafted by people. Instead, objects and persons are things in the process of becoming in relation to each other, and are perceived as participating in an ongoing continual transformation in the inter-artefactual domain (Thomas, 1999; Colchester, 2003).

Taking detailed accounts of key moments when relationships between people and things become visible reveals how value is created through transformation, mutation and destruction (Strathern, 1988). When disposing of clothing, women attempt to keep those special 'skins' within the family, preserving their integrity within the domestic sphere. The next best option is to convert them into pots, less satisfactory as it represents the decline of singular value towards the utilitarian, symbolized by the disdain with which the dealers are viewed. The least favourable option is the destruction of cloth, resulting in the exchange of its singular, symbolic value for hard cash. Yet this process can also be viewed in another, more positive sense, which allows for renewal and self-creation through sacrifice and destruction (Küchler, 2002). Objects and people are continuously on the move, and the relationships between them are fluid and dynamic – clothes become quilts, saris become pots and silk brocade is reduced to a few grains of silver.

Note

1. See Kramrisch (1989[1939]) for a discussion of the significance of Bengali quilts known as *Kantha*.

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