

DEEP LOCALISATION: A FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL EUROPEAN FASHION SCHOOLS?

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ABSTRACT | Western design cultures continue to propagate specific concepts of modernity, globally, at the expense of local, non-western and sustainable traditions which have been described as sacrifice zones in the expansion of the global fashion industry. In addition to the large number of international students that enrol in design schools in the UK and Europe each year, one of the enablers of this form of neocolonialism has been the international expansion of many Western design schools. Is there, now, a responsibility for these schools to help preserve and promote the cultural crafts and clothing systems that the global fashion industry has all but erased? Are there, in fact, some particular advantages that these schools might bring to supporting endangered traditions? This research offers a case study of ways that deeply-localised, design-led, project-based learning equips Indian students studying at an international fashion school in India with deeply-contextualised skills and knowledge. At the request of the artisan community of Kotpad, Odisha, mediated by project partner Creative Bee, Hyderabad, and guided by ongoing dialogue, the project aims to assist artisans in negotiating change by preserving knowledge of and promoting an at-risk textile tradition through a series of staged interventions, in the hope that this may defend their craft against macro and micro local and global challenges, including continuing forms of colonisation.

1. Introduction

1.1 Fashion and Capitalism

Fashion has been described as the favourite child of capitalism (Sombart, 1902): dependent on the rapid obsolescence of goods that must be replaced by the *new* in a cycle of perpetual growth, and therefore is dependant on a system of escalating resource extraction (Hickel, 2021, Marx, 1990). An insatiable quest for modernity in wealthy countries has resulted in enormous volumes of low-quality, discarded or unsold garments being exported to less affluent countries in the Global South, much of which ends up in vast dumps, and where eighty percent of the negative environmental impacts of fashion are felt (Greenpeace, 2022).

Western fashion exemplifies a particular paradigm of modernity that has been imposed on non-Western clothing cultures, undermining local expressions and systems of fashion and thus leading to what has been termed as ‘fashion sacrifice zones’ (Niessen, 2020: 864, Escobar, 2018, Cheang et al, 2021, Torretta and Reistma, 2019). It is beyond time to realise that,

“...we are living with the legacies of ways of thinking that took their modern shape in the nineteenth century, and it is high time to subject them to the best thinking of the twenty first.” (Appiah, 2018: XIII)

1.2 Western Fashion and Its Sacrifice Zones

Fashion sacrifice zones are cultures whose identity – as expressed through clothing and/or specific materials and techniques - has become obscured or even erased (directly or indirectly) by Western fashion (Niessen, 2020: 864). Multinational brands have arisen from the West that contribute to the erosion of local clothing traditions in a number of ways: they continue to colonise more sustainable systems of clothing creation by asserting how fashion should be designed, produced, sold, and consumed at the expense of local, pluriversal clothing cultures that might otherwise articulate their own paradigms of modernity (Niessen 2020, Jansen, 2020, Escobar, 2018, de Sousa Santos, 2014). Fashion sacrifice zones are compounded by the depletion of local resources; changes in local labour opportunities (for example, towards industrial garment production); the transition of a community to become consumers for industrialised fashion; and the swamping of local markets with second-hand clothing from Western countries; and ultimately the loss of knowledge systems on which a local clothing culture is dependent (Niessen, 2020: 865, Jansen, 2020). The extractive practices of capitalism include the ways that traditional cultures are mined and appropriated as inspiration by the fashion industry in clothing collections that rarely acknowledge the source of this cultural intellectual property, or else objectify artisan communities in their reductive marketing communications (Bota Moisin, 2017).

2. Western Fashion Education Today

Much like its fashion system, a Western model of fashion education has been exported to many other parts of the world. Rooted in Eurocentric design histories, ideals of beauty, and the values of unregulated capitalism, the Western model of fashion education trains students to join a fashion industry that is tied to extractive, colonial practices and in thrall to the orthodoxy of growth (Fletcher and Tham, 2019, Torretta and Reistma, 2019, Vettorello, 2023). Until relatively recently, Western education has been unquestioning of its role as a propagator of specific concepts of modernity, globally, that no longer serves us (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, Orr, 1994:5, Dawson, 2019, Vettorello, 2023). We reap what we have sown:

“Without significant precautions, education can equip people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth.” (Orr, 1994:5)

2.1 International Students Studying Design in the UK

UK art and design schools enjoy an international reputation for creative excellence - indeed the two best design universities in world rankings are first the Royal College of Art (for the ninth consecutive year) and then University of the Arts London (QS Top Universities, 2023). A seductive article by the British Fashion Council in India invites potential students to,

“Step into a world of limitless possibilities in the United Kingdom, where academic excellence meets innovation.” (British Council India, 2023)

International students studying in the UK currently contribute approximately £2.25 billion to the UK economy (London Economics, 2023). The largest group of these are from Asian countries (HESA 2023), in particular from China and India. Enrolments from these countries increased significantly between 2017/2018 and 2021/2022, to 151,690 enrolments and 126,535 enrolments respectively, as shown in Figure 1 (HESA, 2023).

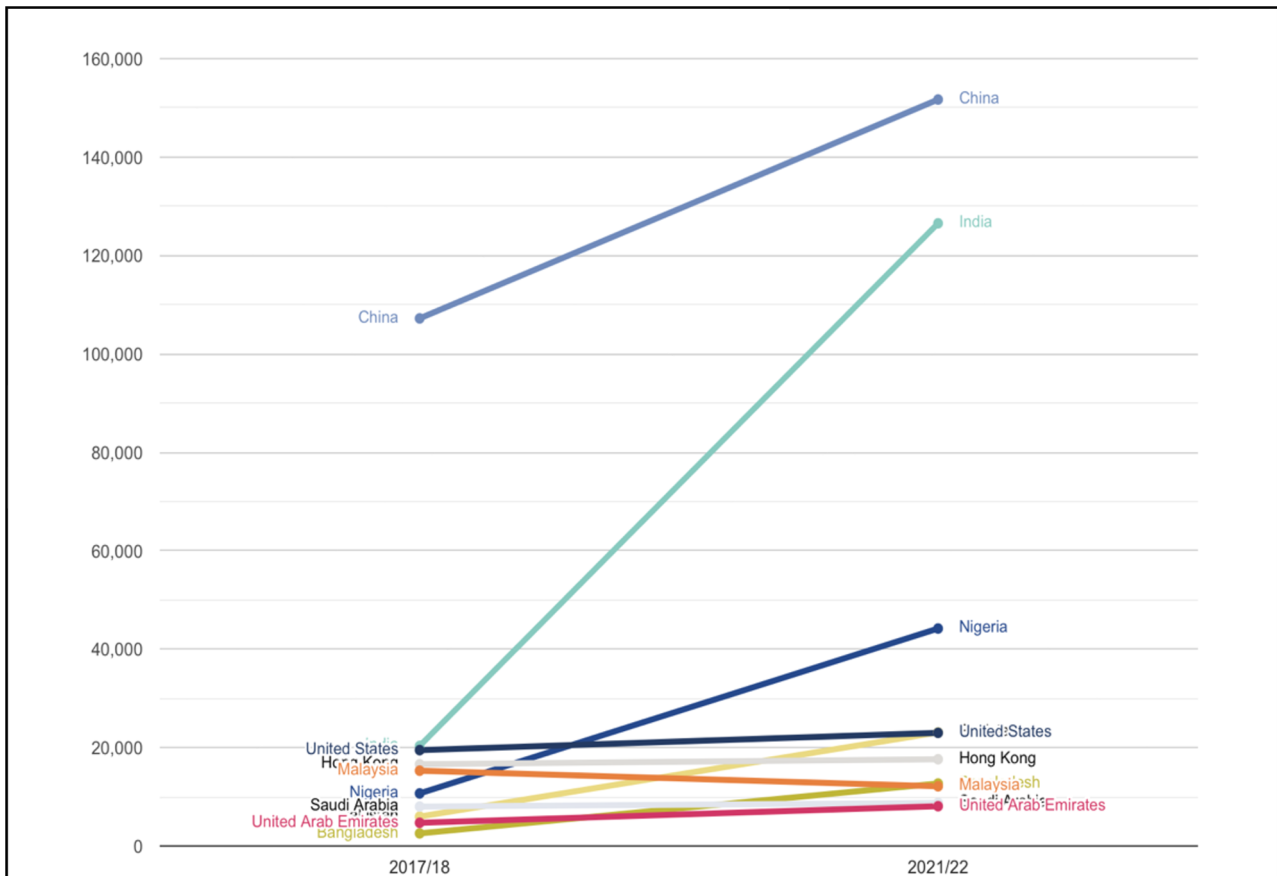


Figure 1. Patterns of growth in Non-EU enrolments in UK HEIs 2017/2019 – 2021/2022, showing a sharp rise in enrolment of Chinese and Indian students (HESA, 2023).

Specialist design universities in the UK have seen a dramatic rise in overseas enrolments in general, and have become reliant on these to fill financial gaps left by government reduction in funding for Higher Education in the public sector or to boost profits (Figure 2). At the Royal College of Art and the University of the Arts, overseas student enrolments have risen from approximately 35% in 2016 to 53% in 2021. Therefore, overseas students represent a significant proportion of the UK student body (Aguilar García et al, 2023).

Similar patterns of international enrolment appear for EU universities, with 25% of students studying in European countries coming from Asia in 2021, although specific data on enrolments for art and design by nationality was unavailable (Eurostat, 2023).

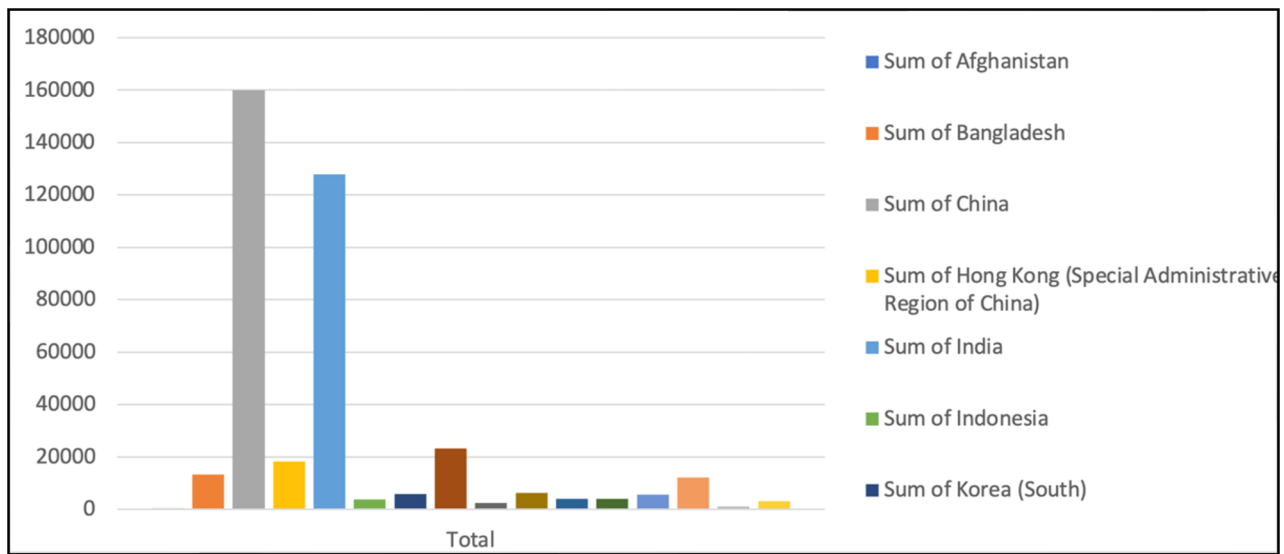


Figure 2. Enrolment data for Asian students in specialist design schools in UK 21/22 (HESA, 2023).

2.2 UK and EU Design Schools Overseas

In addition to the large number of international students that enrol in design schools in the UK and Europe each year (HESA 21/22, Eurostat 2023), one of the enablers of colonialism may be the international expansion of many Western fashion schools. International expansion is here defined as partnerships with overseas institutions (for example, in curriculum development), as project partners or as validating bodies, or through the establishment of an entire school or campus overseas.

Fashion education increasingly is searching for ways to evolve more ethical approaches, while continuing to train young people to join the industry as it is now. While this uneasy compromise fails to drive the urgent systemic change needed for us to live within planetary boundaries and prevent further climate change, students must find employment when they graduate in an industry that has yet to fully comprehend the seismic transformation required of it. It is crucial to critically self-reflect, as Western fashion educators, on our positionality and the values that are implicit in what and how we teach - and to whom (Torretta and Reistma, 2019, Vettorello, 2023). As Haraway reminds us,

“It matters what stories we tell to tell stories with...it matters what thoughts think thoughts.” (Haraway, 2017: 12)

Is there, now, a responsibility for Western fashion schools to actively regenerate the cultural crafts and clothing knowledges – the sacrifice zones - that the global fashion industry and its education system have all but erased? It is of urgent importance to learn from traditional knowledge systems that have existed for centuries, if not millennia, that embody ways to produce clothing in emotionally, environmentally and culturally sustainable ways, which today have all but been erased by Western fashion (Harper, 2018, Chapman, 2015, Niessen, 2020), but how might we do this in a non-extractive way? How, now, might we right the wrongs of a particular form of colonial oppression that has been imposed on non-Western design cultures (Niessen, 2020, Vettorello, 2023)? Are there, in fact, any specific advantages that Western design schools might bring to supporting endangered traditions, if they will work humbly in non-Western settings (Torretta and Reitsma, 2019)?

2.3 Western Fashion Education in India

As indicated previously, Indian students represent a significant proportion of overseas students studying in design the UK and EU today. In recent years, a number of Western universities and design schools have become closely linked with Indian design schools and some have established their own schools.

Istituto Marangoni Mumbai (IMM) was opened in 2017 to bring the values of Italian design to fashion education in India (Istituto Marangoni, no date). The School Director is Indian, the Director of Education of Indian heritage, and approximately 70% of the tutors Indian, with some 30% from other countries. Students may study for two years in Mumbai before completing an undergraduate qualification at one of the European IM schools, or complete a shorter programme after two years.

The teaching philosophy of IMM is one of locally-contextualised learning that is evolving a distinctive identity across all courses. This includes collaborative projects with local designers that promote local heritage, skills and knowledge systems; visits to and collaborations with local artisan communities and textile producers; recruiting inspiring Indian designer-mentors for students; and the promotion of local cultural crafts, which are characterised as true luxury in a counter-narrative to the conventional concepts of luxury in Western fashion.

Fashion students at IMM come from all over the incredibly diverse Indian sub-continent. They are encouraged to research in depth, to look inwards, experiment, and to find new inspiration in their own local crafts. This approach provides students with an opportunity to discover and refine a unique design identity, that is simultaneously rooted in tradition and authenticity, and to construct a culturally sustainable value system that will guide them in their future careers. Multiple workshops and studio visits enable students to work closely with artisans, in their own language, to develop and co-design together. This process equips the artisans with new ideas that may support their livelihoods and enables the students to develop vital skills in innovating with local crafts for local and global markets. Social and environmental responsibility is reinforced by encouragement to use only local, natural, and sustainable materials, through which students build a network of local artisans, suppliers and manufacturers that are invaluable for their future careers. Final-year collections are distinctive in their use of local materials and the application of embellishment techniques created in partnership with local artisans. Graduating students eventually will work with local designers, who require a good knowledge of local and global. Furthermore, affluent urban consumers in India now actively seek out and appreciate the value and beauty of local textile crafts and enjoy wearing modern interpretations of these. Recent praise of and publicity for international designers that use extraordinary Indian expertise and materials in their collections, including the Dior Fall 2023 show that took place in Mumbai, has stimulated a further sense of pride in Indian craftsmanship.

A common challenge encountered by the school is that some artisans struggle to independently innovate for new markets and many cannot afford to experiment with new ideas because of the financial risks attached. Experimentation may require new materials, dyes, equipment and time, and may not result in success and sales. The school is now deepening its localisation approach by attempting to support a hard-to-reach artisan community that faces particular challenges, including through the experimentation and sampling processes required to innovate for new markets.

2.4 Nothing Comes Without Its Worlds

The negative impacts of colonialism, Western modernity and globalisation on India's cultural textile sector have been well-documented (Jena, 2019, Bannerjee and Mazzarella, 2022, Roy, 2020). Europeans have a problematic history in the region, and the British in particular. Until Indian independence in 1947, the British systematically undermined local textile traditions, reducing India to a source of raw materials for industrialised British mills whose fabrics were then exported back to India (Bannerjee and Mazzarella, 2022, Roy, 2020).

India is an example of a country where cultural craft has fought back, where some traditions have been maintained and even successfully recovered. However, in spite of many initiatives designed to support or revive traditional textile knowledge systems by Indian governments over the years, many remain in decline and are at risk of being lost (Tarai, 2022, Jena, 2019). The reasons for this are complex, manifold and to some extent locally specific, however some recurring factors may be identified: the competition to local handwoven textiles from cheaper, synthetic, industrially produced fabric (including sarees, kurta and dhoti); the influence of globalised clothing styles that undermine local identity and influence tastes, particularly in urban areas; the subsequent reduction in market for traditional crafts; the inability of artisans to adapt their designs to contemporary markets that might afford labour-intensive craft; the reluctance of youth to learn time-consuming and highly-skilled crafts, when the market for these is too small to provide a sustainable income; the crafts being associated with the past, rather than representing modernity; a lack of entrepreneurial and IT skills; and other social or environmental factors that may affect the value chain (Tarai, 2022, Jena, 2019, Roy, 2020).

3. The Kotpad Project

At the request of the artisan community of Kotpad, Odisha, mediated by Bina Rao, project partner and founder of Creative Bee, Hyderabad, and guided by ongoing dialogue, a holistic research and design project has been created with IMM and IML to deliver a series of staged interventions that may assist the Kotpad artisan community in negotiating change and in helping to preserve, promote and ultimately regenerate an at-risk Indian textile tradition. The team members from IML, IMM, and Creative Bee hold positions of privilege and power relative to the Kotpad artisans. As much as possible, our activities have been guided by the artisans: by their wishes, their ambitions, their ideas, their skills, and by the limits and possibilities they decide. However, we acknowledge the precarious nature of this intervention, that has at times lapsed into the prescriptive, and have attempted to hold space for the listening that reinstates balance and facilitates cultural sensitivity (Torretta and Reistma, 2019). Bina Rao has a long-standing relationship with the community and has therefore been an invaluable in assisting understanding of local culture, gender and other social politics, religion and environment.

3.1 Plan

This research offers a case study of stage one of a collaborative project between IMM, IML, Creative Bee, and the artisan community of Kotpad. The project offers a lens through which to examine the ways that situated, negotiated and humble research and design activities might articulate a new, deeply localised role for Western fashion education today. It draws on field work that took place in January and November 2023, which included interviews with the dyers and weavers, local youth, and with designers that have worked with the artisans for many years. A review of existing literature revealed that previous initiatives from local government, designers, educational institutions and organisations have not resulted in sufficient long-term benefits (Jena, 2019, Dutta and Maulik, 2021, Tarai, 2022). Analysis of the project activities and findings (to date) identifies the interactions and impacts of diverse ecologies of knowledge (de Sousa Santos, 2014), the potential benefits and difficulties of the collaboration, the challenges that have been encountered along the way, and are foreseen in future.

3.2 Plan/Design

Figure 3 presents the project plan, adapted from Yin (2018), which outlines the processes used for this research. We consider this to be a flexible framework rather than a cage, however, and are responsive to the dynamic and generative nature of collaborative research may be marked by serendipity. Therefore, the sub-headings in the sections below indicate where more than one part of the process has taken place simultaneously.

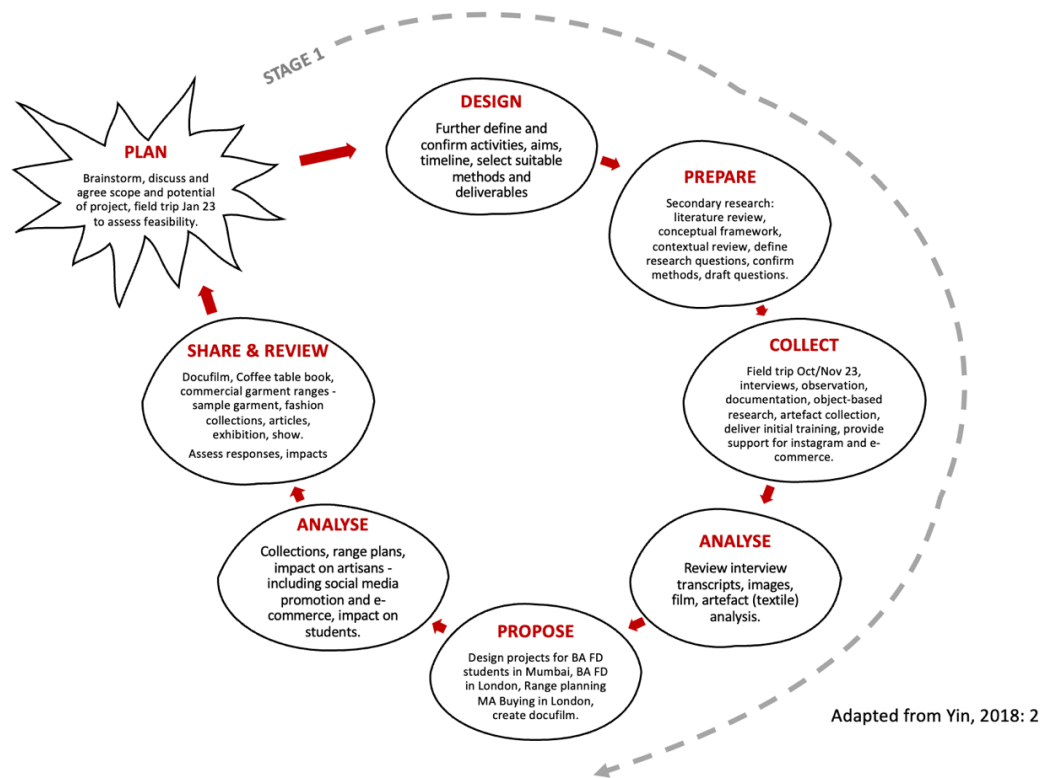


Figure 3. The Kotpad case study process plan.

3.3 Design

The Kotpad artisans wanted to learn how to promote their textiles online in order to reach new markets. They were open to developing new textile designs (within the strict parameters they set on fibre, colour range and weaving technique). For this project, they would like enough work to keep their looms busy for three to six months or longer and to raise awareness of the contemporary potential of their cultural craft more widely in the region and even internationally. They want customers to appreciate the time and skill required by the complex, ancient processes that achieve the deep red of the aal dye and the distinctiveness of their woven textiles, and who would be willing to pay what their work is really worth. Ultimately, they are hoping for an improved market that will enable their craft to continue for generations to come. Creative Bee asked IMM and IML to carefully document all the techniques, processes and products created by the Kotpad artisans so that there is a detailed record of these.

The schools will offer a holistic package that includes documentation of the craft and its skilled artisan community, support with product development for contemporary markets, branding, online promotion and e-commerce. In addition, they will showcase the outcomes in exhibitions and shows that improve regional and international awareness of the potential of Kotpad textiles in fashion that is simultaneously rooted in place and authenticity.

The initial scoping visit to Kotpad by representatives from IMM, IML, and Creative Bee took place in January 2023, after which a plan was developed in consultation with Creative Bee and the Kotpad artisans.

3.4 Prepare/Collect/Analyse

A second visit to Kotpad took place in November 2023, to conduct interviews, document histories, materials, techniques and value chains, to identify the challenges and opportunities that confront this artisan community today. A researcher from IML conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with

weavers, dyers, and youth in the community, as well as with Bina and Kesav Rao, while observing and documenting all processes, investigating local and personal histories, material culture, customs, gender-politics, environmental issues, and their concerns, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the specific local context and the wishes of the community. The interviews with individual aal-dyers and weavers used a similar questionnaire as a starting point, enabling interview data to be triangulated. The group was accompanied by an Indian film and photography crew from IMM to capture local context, people, tools, materials, techniques and processes (Figures 4, 5, 6). Saloni Lakhia, a representative from the United Nations Institute of Training and Research (UNITAR), joined us to conduct a needs assessment for more holistic training that might benefit the Kotpad community, particularly to support women and the local youth. Initial training was delivered in packaging, promotion on social media and an introduction to e-commerce. Bina and Kesav Rao acted as invaluable intermediaries and interpreters with the artisans – some of who spoke their tribal language rather than the more common Hindi.

3.5 Collect/Analyse

Kotpad tribal textiles represent many centuries of situated knowledge of how to produce materials for clothing that are emotionally and environmentally sustainable (Chapman, 2015). However, these precious textiles are no longer economically sustainable. The Kotpad artisan community face the mounting suffocation of their tribal identity, culture, craft and knowledge by intersecting external factors that are outside of their control and by internal cultural factors that are constricting opportunity (Figure 6). Today this community comprises approximately 10-12 female aal dyers and a similar number of male weavers from families that have passed down their knowledge for at least six generations of the Panika tribal group. They trace their craft back to the sixth century, when they claim it was introduced by Kabir, considered a patron saint of weavers.

The techniques used to create Kotpad textiles comprise many labour-intensive, repeated processes and stages (Figures 4, 5, 6). The characteristic deep red, cotton yarn in their weaving takes approximately three weeks to perfect. Women learn aal-dyeing from their mothers or mothers-in-law using the ground root bark of the aal tree (*morinda citrifolia*) and the dye confers natural, anti-bacterial properties on the yarn. The aal traditionally is harvested and sold by the Alkudu tribal people that gather this sustainably without damage to the tree. They source their cotton yarn from bigger centres in Odisha or in Andhra Pradesh, and tussar silk yarn from Jagdalpur. Other essential ingredients to their complex dyeing process are castor oil, ash water, and cow dung. In addition, they make a deep, warm black dye by mixing jaggery and iron, and have begun to use indigo for dark blue, which was introduced to them by Creative Bee.

Young men and boys learn weaving on pit-loom from their fathers when they are considered old enough – normally at fifteen or sixteen – and the oldest male child is still expected to continue the craft (Figure 5). The traditional motifs in the textiles are created by using a floating weft technique in a contrasting colour (normally red), where additional yarn is woven separately into the warp in an intricate process that requires lifting individual warp threads by hand. There are commonly used motifs, such as fish, but each weaver will create these in their own design (Figure 5). Today there is some government-supported training for girls too, taking place at a small pit-loom centre in Kotpad, and a daily allowance is paid to those undergoing training. Interviews with local people suggest that some attend training for the allowance, rather than a desire to learn the craft and find a future in it. Some men in the community were not happy that women might become weavers, and one woman who mentioned she could weave was quickly silenced by her brother. Regardless of who weaves, there is reduced demand for their culturally-significant textiles, including large shawls that customarily were worn for local weddings (Figure 8), sold in their Sunday markets and further afield in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and beyond. The market has shifted to a preference for cheaper, synthetic textiles, although the aal-dyers themselves all wore cotton sarees which they find much more comfortable to wear in the heat. Climate change is an additional factor affecting local preferences too, as temperatures have risen in the last few decades; therefore, a lighter, industrially-produced fabric is preferred over slightly thicker, firmer Kotpad textiles. From a thriving craft with more than fifty artisans in Kotpad village alone, the number of practising aal dyers and weavers has declined as a consequence of the factors outlined earlier.



Figure 4. Purnima Samrat, a sixth generation aal-dyer, coating cotton yarn with aal and ash water solution in the dyeing process in Kotpad, 2023. (Vora, T., November 2023).

Interviews with youth in the community suggested that there was great interest in continuing the craft amongst them but they could see no future for it, in current market conditions, so were turning to other forms of employment. The ancient dyeing and weaving processes require great skill, patience and are extremely time-consuming – their local customers can no longer afford these textiles and purchase cheap synthetics instead.



Figure 5. The floating weft technique, used to create motifs and pattern in Kotpad textiles, is extremely time-consuming and requires great skill, Kotpad 2023. (Vora, T., November 2023).

In addition, local development and pollution affect the availability of natural resources. For example, the aal harvesters used to collect the root bark near or even within Kotpad village, but due to deforestation the trees are now around 200 miles away in a forested region controlled by Naxalite rebels. From fluid, local and accessible transactions, sourcing aal root bark now relies on traders coming to Kotpad and thus higher costs. Local government has planted an aal tree nursery a few miles from Kotpad and this should, in time, become a reliable source of dye if the tradition survives that long. The lake near the village where the aal-dyers historically washed the yarn between phases of the dye process is now too polluted with rubbish to use, so they must travel further afield to a river, incurring additional travel costs (Figure 6).



Figure 6. IMM film crew recording the rinsing process that is part of aal-dyeing and repeated at various stages, at a river 15 minutes' drive from Kotpad, 2023. (Scott, K., November 2023).

3.6 Analyse

The Figure 7 diagram summarises the most significant factors that are impacting Kotpad artisans in continuing their craft, providing a sense of the suffocation they experience. Analysis of these factors suggests that there are measures that can be taken in the short term that will improve the resilience of the craft and the livelihoods of the artisans, and which may help to preserve knowledge of the craft before it is lost. The need to preserve this knowledge before it is too late was identified as paramount, followed by support in raising awareness of the craft and finding new markets.

In the short to medium term there are opportunities to promote Kotpad textiles through social media, using visual storytelling with compelling imagery, as well as through design projects that showcase the potential of their work in contemporary luxury clothing. The patterns used in the textiles can be adapted in multiple ways, without changing the technique used. Exhibiting the outcomes online and physically may support the artisans in finding new markets that are able to afford their highly specialised, time-consuming, natural, wholly sustainable textiles.

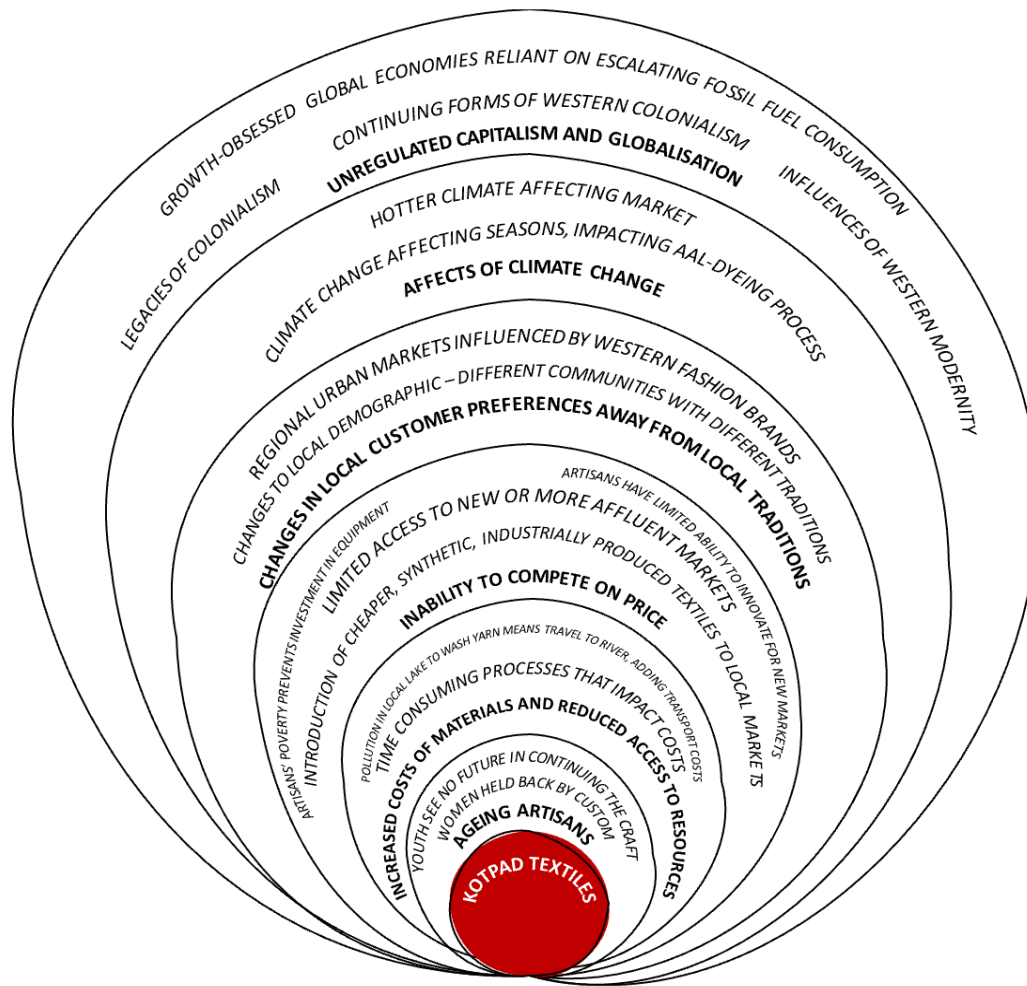


Figure 7. A summary of factors impacting the Kotpad textile artisans, showing the complex macro and micro obstacles that they face.

3.7 Propose

In the short term, a docufilm has been created to capture the lives, environment, histories, culture, skills, materials, techniques, processes and textiles of the Kotpad artisans by a team of film makers from IMM (Figures 4, 5, 6, 8). This film provides an important record of unique people and their situated craft practices for posterity. In addition, an illustrated book will be published that includes more detailed information.

Mevin Murden, Director of Education at IMM, gave some initial training to the younger artisans on how to photograph their stock in the most attractive way, including the important practicalities, such as ironing the products first, how to curate a photoshoot, best lighting, background etc. Mevin's background in luxury branding enabled him to support the artisans with ideas for non-verbal communication (such as packaging, initial logo ideas) that may help to elevate the status of this textile and reach a more affluent customer. IMM fashion business students have since created a brand logo (Figure 9) and an Instagram page for master weaver Purushottam Samrat, who represents his fellow artisans at #purushottam_kotpad. The page is administered by his oldest son Baskar, and will showcase Kotpad textiles to sell directly to consumers rather than to businesses, gaining a better financial return and reaching a wider market locally and internationally. Crucial to this strategy is the powerful visual storytelling that connects community to brand, and repositions Kotpad textiles as a premium product that is socially, aesthetically, emotionally and environmentally sustainable (Harper, 2018, Chapman, 2015).



Figure 8. A traditional style of Kotpad wedding shawl showing some motifs and patterns commonly incorporated in these, Kotpad, 2023 (Scott, K. 2023).



Figure 9. Branding created for the Kotpad artisans by Istituto Marangoni Mumbai Fashion Business students.

Further training will be provided to the artisans on marketing, branding and e-commerce, so that their work can reach other customers in the region. Reciprocity is considered key to the success of this project, where mutual learning is made possible in ways that may help to right the wrongs of Western fashion. This approach reflects aspects of humble design in the co-creation of products and services that is led by local actors (Torretta and Reistma, 2019).

In the medium term (stage 2), IMM and IML students and faculty will offer textile development ideas (within parameters set by the artisans) and fashion designs, commercial range planning, and product development for the luxury sector. Selected small collections and products will be produced as sample garments that demonstrate the enormous potential of Kotpad textiles as contemporary, sustainable fabrics. Some initial orders for existing fabrics have now been placed, while IMM students develop new motifs to be trialled.

It is important to be clear about what is and what is not within our scope to change, as fashion schools and as fashion practitioners. The inequalities and sacrifice zones engendered by capitalism and colonisation are formidable challenges that we are all compelled to address. The complex, structural disadvantages experienced by the Kotpad artisan community require a more systemic intervention than IMM, IML and Creative Bee are able to engineer alone. What we can do – first and foremost – is to listen, then to exchange and develop ideas in collaboration with the Kotpad artisans, and to offer support in specific, design and business-related areas within our expertise that may improve the market and encourage the youth to find a future in an ancient craft. Within our curricula, we can continue to emphasise the value of traditional crafts in ways that may inspire young designers and business students with an appreciation of their own cultural heritage, and of slow and local, place-based systems that challenge Western fashion colonialism. We are able to use our skills, our resources, and our networks (our privilege) to amplify these materials, techniques and processes that embody sustainable collaboration with nature, in ways which may attract others to work with endangered textile knowledge systems. In addition, Kesav (from Creative Bee) has already delivered natural dye training using locally available plants, to increase the range of colours that Kotpad fabrics can sustainably be made in, as well as finding alternative natural mordants. The UNITAR representative that accompanied the team in November 2023 will raise funding for a holistic training in IT, entrepreneurial skills, literacy and numeracy, and empowerment for women and girls that builds the community's resilience in a changing world. In these ways, we may affect longer-term change.

4. In summary

This research reveals how deeply-localised, design-led learning and teaching activities might advance a now crucial role for international fashion schools in preserving, promoting and regenerating traditions that Western design cultures have previously de-futured. It identifies specific challenges that negatively affect the Kotpad artisans, including the impacts of western modernity; it outlines potential benefits that a bespoke designed intervention of this type might offer to all parties; and finally, it suggests that (if they get it right) this role may even be framed as international fashion schools' responsibility today.

IMM and IML were invited into this project by Creative Bee and the Kotpad artisans. Although the project has been designed together, we acknowledge the problematics of a Western fashion school descending on an artisan community in India to offer solutions to the complex challenges they face. While our proposed solutions have been co-created, they may ultimately turn out to be temporary or even ineffective. We ask ourselves whether we are merely re-enacting practices that reflect unequal privilege and power: to some extent we are. However, we believe that we may now have something specific to contribute to a transition away from extraction and over-production in fashion, which advocates for traditions that hold vital clues to how we might live in collaboration with - rather than in opposition to - nature. The benefits of the collaboration to the Kotpad artisans include training and support that may improve their resilience and equip them to reach new markets that can afford the higher costs that slow textiles demand, in the face of competition from low cost, low quality, industrially-produced fabrics. Istituto Marangoni's Italian design roots reflect a historic appreciation for high quality local textiles and the values of craft, legacy and innovation. The school works closely with the luxury sector and is therefore particularly well-placed to

support artisans in developing new ideas and innovation for those contemporary markets that can pay the premium that slow, handcrafted materials require; to provide guidance with branding, packaging and promotion that amplify the luxury of their craft; in developing e-commerce capabilities; in the documentation of their craft for posterity, through a docufilm and a significant publication; and with shorter-term financial support in the forms of orders for project sampling and experimentation.

The students and tutors at IMM and IML benefit enormously by learning how to work pragmatically and creatively within boundaries dictated by the artisans themselves; being able to see the textiles developed in collaboration with the artisans realised and showcased in small fashion collections; by learning to define implementable range plans and create sample garments suitable for small-scale production that amplify the local; and by increasing their knowledge of and appreciation for the value of craft traditions today. The design process is naturally constrained by the seasonal availability and sustainable supply of the raw materials required for Kotpad textiles, and by lead times that must accommodate fluctuating weather conditions that impact dye processes. Such restrictions are rare in an industry built on exponential growth, and resource use. Today it is crucial to re-learn how to work within natural limits in the face of enormous environmental and climate challenges. This deeply-localised approach reveals how we might reconnect with limits and begin to hospice and transition away from the mainstream, while regenerating traditions that have sustainably been performed for centuries, to re-materialise a pluriversal fashion system that is characterised by less and better. On completion of stage two of this project, completed collections will be analysed to measure the ways that students have responded, comparing outcomes in Mumbai and in London, interpreting the meanings of this, and gathering feedback from the artisans, Creative Bee, potential customers, and the press. We will reflect on this analysis, learn from it, and may need to adapt our strategy accordingly. We will evaluate the success of the Kotpad Instagram account in raising awareness of the endangered craft and increasing sales.

As a global community of fashion and design educators, we have the privilege (and responsibility) to shape the values that will best serve people and planet, by training young designers to be able to challenge the hegemony of mainstream fashion. By consistently embedding localisation deeply in learning and teaching practices – and by privileging local traditions and skills over dominant fashion mores – international fashion schools may decolonise design teaching to support cultural resilience, while developing curricula and activities that offer multiple benefits to students, faculty and the wider community. If collaboration is formed with artisans that have suffered as a result of colonisation and globalisation – and is led by their voices rather than imposed in an unequal power dynamic – there may be opportunity to redress (in part) violence committed by the global fashion system. This research, while focuses on fashion and textiles, may be significant to all other design disciplines emanating from the West.

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