



TEREZA KULDOVA

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# LUXURY INDIAN FASHION

A Social Critique

**Tereza Kuldova**

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# INTRODUCTION

Radhika entered a coffee shop in the Emporio luxury mall in Vasant Kunj, an upmarket residential area of South West Delhi; her heels click-clacking louder against the marble floor than usual. She sunk deep into a soft armchair, yelled at the waiter, ordered a latte and looking at me shivering with urgency, said: 'We have to call up Aman, ASAP'. 'Ok, sure, but what's going on?' 'Abhi's father is about to expire, totally out of the blue, but it's a sure thing. They are giving him max five days. Abhi's mom is out of her mind, and Aisha has enough to do supporting Abhi. All that pressure, he will have to take over the companies, arrange the cremation.' 'Sorry to hear that, but why do you need Aman, a fashion designer?' 'Seriously? We must turn this funeral into an event. It is a golden chance for all of us!' Dreaming herself away, she again emphasized 'golden'; gold being the ultimate purifying substance in the Indian universe, connected to auspiciousness and immortality of the lineage, to wealth, power and fame, and in psychoanalytical terms to faeces, waste, and shit (Laporte 2000). Indeed Patrizia Calefato has a point when noting that 'luxury fever becomes total delirium when our eternal rest is at stake' (Calefato 2014: 48), a statement that pushes us towards an inquiry into the perplexing connection between luxury and death, waste, and pollution. Cremation diamonds, anyone?

'Hello-o-o, MJ was a big shot, the self-made industrialist. Nobody will forget this funeral, I swear. Abhi will become the new MJ and they will have to take him seriously.' 'So the idea is to turn this funeral into a PR stunt?' 'Exactly! We are talking at least 13 days packed with rituals, offerings, mingling, and high-profile visitors. It will be stunning and lavish, emotions running high. We have to get going, call up Aman right now, we must get hold of his white embroidered *saris*, *salwar suits*, *kurtas*, table cloths, and decorations, whatever he has. I stock only colourful *chikan* and bridal couture. We need the white on white classics. That is the thing to wear for a funeral, high quality, delicate and traditional, understated luxury and yet royal. They will shift MJ home from the hospital tomorrow evening. We have to style the house – flowers, incense, pillows, sheets, curtains, even soaps. After he expires we need to cover the mirrors with the embroidered cloth, also we have to fix the food catering. I was thinking custom-made white chocolate truffles in shapes of gods, and crystal decorations. We need to make a list of guests, fix a

celebrity priest. Oh, maybe we could showcase MJ's art collection at the occasion.' I already feel overwhelmed, thinking about MJ still fighting on the deathbed. 'Radhika, I know you are superb at designing stunning weddings, but are you sure about applying the same logic to a funeral? What about the mourning and ritual pollution?' 'Oh come on, times are changing, funeral or wedding, it is all about mingling and business. Who comes to your funeral will soon be as important as who comes to your wedding. Besides, people should be blown away by the event and say: "MJ expired in style." We should celebrate him, it is just the soul leaving the body, after all if everything is beautiful around, it will go so much smoother for the soul, isn't it?' She laughs at the thought and continues, 'I swear, design funeral is the music of tomorrow. The greatness of the man reflected in the greatness of his funeral.' Radhika went on. The phantasmatic image that she painted in front of us was a montage of an exotic calmness of a Thai spa, like those in five-star hotels, retouched by ambient music of sacred Hindu chants, all set in MJ's neo-baroque farmhouse akin to a royal palace with lush gardens decorated with even more white flowers. Even in death and mourning there is no escaping the logic of ambient theatrical stage sets, the logic that dominates fashion shows and elite events. Affective spaces and experience design are the current *mantra* of fashion design and marketing. Forget direct advertising, this is the era of self-effacement of the advertiser (Serazio 2013), of invisible consumer governance that tries to seduce our unconscious and capture and direct our desires. It operates through affective ambient design and emotionally charged ritualized spectacles carefully staged within such theatrical spaces. As Frédéric Lordon argued, manipulation of affects capable of inducing an aligned desire is the perennial goal of power and of all institutions of capture (Lordon 2014). Such a strategy of power relies on inducing joyful affects and amorous passions towards the master and his desire, be the master a boss, a brand or public opinion. As a result, it creates men and women who passionately embrace the master desire, even if it were their own servitude.

A few hours later, we sit in Aman's studio in South Delhi, discussing the idea of a designer funeral. Aman is overexcited, burning with sudden creative passion. Having designed trousseaus and weddings far too many times in his career and having been forced to do the neo-royal opulent bling time and again in order to stay in business, he now sees an opportunity to show off the designs he loves the most, that is the sober, multi-layered but airy attires decorated with delicate white on white traditional *chikan* embroidery from Lucknow. For any luxury connoisseur, *chikan* embroidery evokes the indulgent worlds of the Nawabi rulers of Awadh, synonymous with cultural refinement and Indo-Persian style and the city of Lucknow that once used to be called the Venice of the Orient, Shiraz-i-Hind or the Constantinople of India and has built its reputation as a fashion centre of languorous grace. Aman loved the popular local tale of the extravagant nawabs who commissioned artisans working under their patronage to embroider such elaborate and delicate *chikan kurtas* on muslin that they took two years to make,



only to be worn once (see Chapter 2). These pieces are said to have been so delicate that after a single use they simply dissolved, bringing luxury and waste together yet again. Traditional white on white *chikan* has an ambiguous status. On the one hand it is the utmost royal-like luxury that takes months to produce, making the women embroiderers progressively blind; on the other hand its whiteness is symbolic both of mourning and widowhood and of purity and knowledge. It is almost as if its proximity to death increases its seductive appeal.

Nine days later MJ expired, to use the popular Hinglish idiom. He died in style, indeed. Radhika made Aman and his workers run around the house and the garden, decorating it to minute detail. The official funeral theme was White Lotus, signifying purity, truth and divinity as much as proud patriotism (lotus is the national flower). In all bathrooms, white soaps were placed on porcelain lotuses, in all rooms, the air was permeated by a smell of sandalwood, flowers, and oil lamps; an enormous statue of a marble Ganesh, MJ's mate in business whom he worshipped every morning, appeared in the entry hall; a stunning crystal chandelier replaced the old inconspicuous lamp, and an excess of bright arranged flowers and candles in crystal and golden holders of different sizes and shapes lit up the villa. A few days after MJ's cremation, Radhika was showcasing his art collection to the visitors interested in speaking to the son, the heir of the business. Aman was taking care of the dresses of the family members and close friends. Aisha was seen running around in a chiffon *chikan anarkali* dress wearing pale make-up, while Abhi sported light blue jeans and a long *chikan kurta*. Radhika and Aman managed to turn the funeral into a lavish commemoration and a demonstration of prestige, wealth and power during which the business elite had a chance to mingle and discuss future deals. A real drama of emotion, inheritance and power played out in the home turned into a theatrical stage set, where all the actors knew quite well how to play their parts and maintain the family honour as well as business ties. Aesthetics and fashion are clearly an important ingredient of what Abner Cohen calls power mystique. Power mystique to him is 'not just an ideological formula, but is also a way of life, manifesting itself in patterns of symbolic behaviour that can be observed and verified. The ideology is objectified, developed, and maintained by an elaborate body of symbols and dramatic performances' (Cohen 1981: 2–3).

## In the lotus world: luxury and mud, high and low

White Lotus, the theme of the funeral that has transported us into the world of fashion designers and the South Delhi business elite, is a fitting metaphor for the key motif of this book. It is also a fitting metaphor for the ethnographic journey in which this work is grounded and for its analytical angle. Like the lotus, the beauties

of Indian fashion and heritage luxury cannot be conceived without their juxtaposition, without the mud from which they grow and that brings them to life. *At the core of luxury lie painful expropriations. The question might arise: is that maybe precisely what the luxury shopaholic's pleasure derives from?*

India is often portrayed as a land of contrasts, of parallel worlds. It is the land of the rich and the poor, formal and informal economy, materialism and spiritualism, civilization and backwardness, and so on. Not only political ideologues, but academics too are often guilty as charged of (re)producing these bifurcated worlds of the 'new' India versus the 'real' India, one symbolic of modernity and future, the other of tradition and past. And so we read that once we exit the exceptional gated spaces of Gurgaon's world-class amenities, we are "'back in India" as it were' (Kalyan 2011). The new and world class is portrayed as deterritorialized and as distinctively non-Indian, a world set apart, one that provides a 'totalizing experience that makes interaction with the surrounding environment redundant and unnecessary' (Kalyan 2011: 39). It is often said that those living in these gated luxury spaces aspire to live 'as though one were rich and lived in New York, London, Paris, Frankfurt or Amsterdam' (Mani 2008: 53). But is this really so? I suspect that these statements tell us more about the authors than the subject at hand. Anthropological research on elites in South Asia, on the very rich, on those with political ties, black money and lavish lifestyles, is practically non-existent. It is revealing that the only way in which monied elites are represented is by being swallowed into the abstract global and turned into the phantom of neo-liberal globalization, into abstractions such as forces of global capital and therefore into an explanation rather than an object of study. Maybe anthropologists do not want to get their hands really dirty. The old trope of virtuous poverty is still with us; very often it seems that writing about the poor, weak, oppressed and marginalized is still as a noble and morally superior quest, along with giving the poor a voice or empowering them. However, with the changes in political economy that India has seen in the last two decades, this research bias has been criticized. The last decade has seen a boom of a new research agenda, this time focusing on the great rising Indian middle class, on the study of the salaried white collar workers swayed by consumer culture. Governmental employees are the stars of this research, followed by call centre workers, aspiring young men and middle class housewives. Their consumption habits and moralities are placed under the scrutiny of the academic (Brosius 2010, Donner 2011, Favero 2005, Gupta 2008, Liechty 2003, Upadhyya 2008, Varma 1998, Nielsen and Waldrop 2014). While this might be a crude oversimplification of the current diverse research efforts, it is at the same time a telling categorization that captures the main trends. What is startling here is the utmost exclusion of the capitalist class and the constant need for its textual purification by way of abstraction, that is, a process of moving away, of eliminating all unnecessary dirt (think abstract art).

Dominique Laporte's exhilarating and provocative *History of Shit* might throw some light on this exclusion and the need to purify the rich even in theory (Laporte

2000). Laporte confronts us with the crucial role of the management of human waste and privatization of shit for the constitution of modern individual subjectivity, organization of our cities, development of capitalism and emergence of the nation-state. In the process of which, the state obsessed with sanitization – recall the campaign of India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi prior to the Indian elections of 2014 and his slogan 'toilets first, temples later' – has become the ultimate purifier. As Laporte notes,

the State is understood as pure and inviolable, as capable of purifying the most repulsive things – even money – through the touch of its divine hand. Money, therefore, is pure insofar as it belongs to the State; so are, by association, those experts who are summoned to serve it. . . . the site of power must distance itself from shit. So as not to stall the accumulation of wealth, mercantilism must be consigned to the private sphere. . . . It is essential that the private be absolutely and unequivocally aligned with shit.

**LAPORTE** 2000: 40–42

The distinction between private and public was, according to Laporte, established during the sixteenth century also as a distinction between bad money and good money, the private turning into a space of primitive accumulation of money, of hoarding one's shit. As crude as it may sound at first, one is tempted to say that this legacy goes on. The realms of private business and capital are often portrayed as dirty. We find the same logic in Hindu thought that is obsessed with questions of purity and pollution pertaining to the caste system and patterns of hierarchical organization of society. It is no coincidence that the caste of *baniyas*, the moneylenders and businessmen, and also the caste to which some of India's richest individuals belong, from Mukesh Ambani, Lakshmi Mittal, Gautam Adani, K.M. Birla, to Savitri Jindal, is due to its remarkable ability to hoard money portrayed as dirty, untrustworthy, wicked, and as lacking in honour. It is said that the *baniyas* do not perform honour killings, since they have no honour. Repeatedly, I have been told by my *brahmin* friends and others not to trust a *baniya*, since their mercantile mindset, I was told, is 'dirty and dangerous'. We will develop and elaborate on these points below, but now suffice it to ask: do not academics, receiving their money from the state, money that is purified by the state, share this caste prejudice? Is it not why they prefer to study the 'pure' poor or the governmental servants? Do they fear the shit of private money spilling over their pages? Why else the need to turn the flesh and blood of the rich into an abstracted and purified global force or neo-liberalism? Maybe, this pervasive exclusion of the rich global elites from anthropology is driven by the same sort of disgust academia feels towards corporate-funded research.

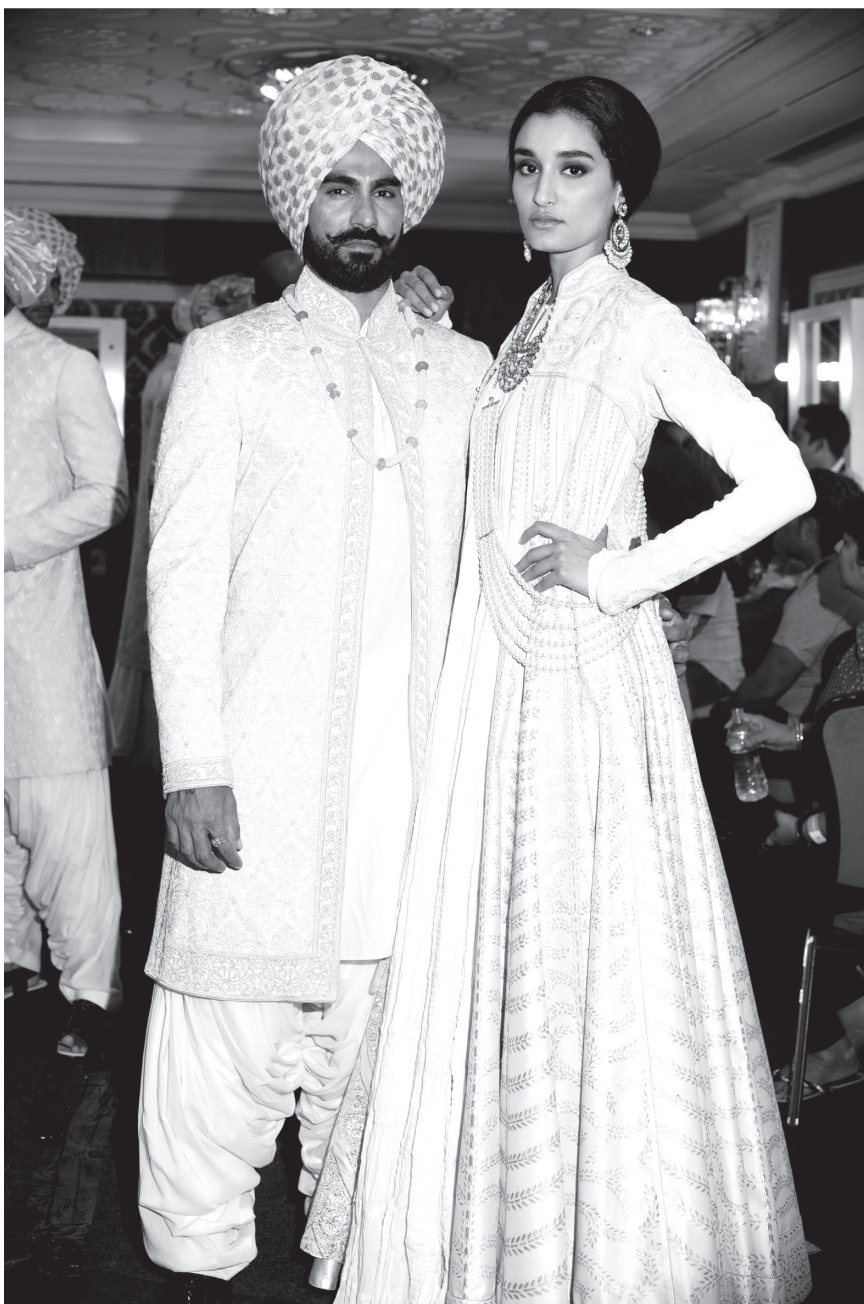
Similarly, fashion has been for a great portion of history considered a far too frivolous subject in academia, approached only with utmost care, precisely due to its connection with the rich (fashion history is a different matter as the time that

has passed allows for the necessary purifying and ennobling distance to emerge). Only in the past decade have fashion studies emerged as a respected discipline. In the case of the study of fashion and clothing in India, we see again clearly what the permissible topics of inquiry are. While high fashion and moneyed elites are a non-existent subject, crafts and textile traditions along with the impoverished craftspeople steal the academic scene (Venkatesan 2009; Wilkinson-Weber 1999; Mohsini 2011; Tyabji and Das 2007; Tarlo 1996; Crill 2006). Clothing, textiles and craft are the decent subjects, while fashion and luxury are obviously still an academic taboo. But we are becoming better at breaking it (Calefato 2014; Entwistle 2009); the recent emergence of critical luxury studies only confirms this (Armitage and Roberts 2015). However, within fashion studies we see another split emerging. Those studying fashion refuse to be associated with those studying craft. At a recent fashion conference, a colleague of mine made this clear. After her talk in which she mentioned craft innovation several times, she exclaimed: 'I just really hope the audience did not think that I am one of those craft losers and do-gooders!' Academia is no value-free universe. It is driven by parallel dynamics to the one into which we are about to dive – the dynamics of high and low, of the luxurious and the dirty, the valuable and worthless and their recurrent collapses into each other. Initially, we posed the question: *if at the core of luxury lie painful expropriations might it be that this is precisely what the luxury shopaholic's pleasure and power derive from?* In order to address this question, we need to bring together that which is so desperately being kept apart, in academic theory, and in practice – namely craft and fashion. We also have to ask, why are they being kept apart? Is it merely their proximity and dependency on each other that demands this pervasive production of distance? Or is there more to this? What kind of real effects does this production of distance have on the ground? How does it translate into power and reproduction of ideology?

## Connecting fashion and craft

One thing is central for our considerations here. The unique selling point (USP) of Indian luxury fashion and heritage luxury is craft. The same craft that appears only within the academically permissible contexts, such as in relation to the nation state, grass-root movements, non-governmental organizations and governmental schemes, and art history. The fact that hundreds of thousands of craftspeople and artisans are more or less directly linked to transnational luxury industries and that Indian fashion designers systematically portray themselves as craft revivalists, and benevolent patrons of diverse craft traditions, is wilfully ignored, as are the actual relations between the rich and the poor. The exploitation of craft, both material and ideological, has intensified during the last decade; we will look at the causes later (see Chapter 1), now suffice it to say that we are facing a new fashion trend in the

elite segment. This trend consists of a combination of heritage luxury, i.e. 'royal chic' (Kuldova 2013a, 2013b) marked by a revival of feudal aesthetics inspired by pre-colonial Indian grandeur (Figure 0.1), and ethical fashion that goes well together with both the aesthetics and ideology of neo-feudalism and the neo-imperial ambitions of the elite India. In contrast to fashion as we know it today from the Western fashion centres, where value derives predominantly from the immaterial, from the brand and the designer name, while the products are marked by an emphasis on cut, detail, often simplicity, in India we see a far stronger emphasis on the value of the material, on the handmade fabrics as much as the opulent ornamentation and its meticulous production by the artisans. This emphasis on the material value itself is subject to dominant ideologies that the designers themselves effectively (re) produce through their own brand mythologies. Craftspeople are indispensable for two reasons. First, in their abstract, purified form, they collectively stand for Indian heritage and the past, materializing Indianness itself, the intangible commodity par excellence. Second, their impoverishment is key to the construction of an image of 'ethical and socially responsible business' and as such, impoverishment is precisely the condition that must be perpetuated. This in turn transforms the designers and the elite consumers not only into benevolent patrons imagined along the lines of the royal patrons of arts and crafts of the bygone era, but also keepers of tradition and guarantors of its continuation – at least, so they say. The elite fashion segment is strongly marked by the emergence of 'philanthrocapitalism' (Bishop and Green 2008) that has fairly recently infected the Indian business and political elite. The field of Indian fashion clearly shows that its success in India is predicated upon a neo-feudal, elitist and hierarchical sentiment. The so-called ethical neo-feudal fashion embodies the power of the elite to subject, to create dependency and to perpetuate poverty and status quo. Craft also guarantees uniqueness, while standing behind other buzzwords of the industry like 'eternal', 'royal', 'timeless', 'ornamentalist', 'heritage', 'fusion' and 'tradition'. Interview any designer in India and he or she will not omit one of them; or read any fashion magazine or press release of India's leading designers like Arjun Khanna, Tarun Tahiliani, JJ Valaya, Ritu Kumar or Rohit Bal. Their ornamentalist heritage luxury pieces, inspired by pre-colonial royal courts, are designed to convey old-world charm that is in many ways anti-modern and anti-democratic and does not care either for political correctness or for female emancipation (Kuldova 2013c). It cares for power and prestige; it aims to recreate hierarchy, aesthetically stunning gender divisions, strong kingly figures and national retro-futuristic fantasies of India's golden age. Philanthropy and ethical consumption, as a distinctly elitist pastime, revolve around carefully designed theatrical bestowals of benevolence. They are about power to subject, about visible displays of inequality. A Marathi poet, Covindaraj, wrote in 1919 that Hindu society is made up of men 'who bow their head to the kicks from above, who simultaneously give a kick below, never thinking to resist the one or refrain from the other' (cited in Dundes 1997: 4).



**FIGURE 0.1** Backstage at India Couture Week 2014, collection by Rohit Bal  
Image courtesy: Nitin Patel Photography.



Indian heritage luxury depends on the meticulous labour of thousands, and as we will see throughout this book, also on the continuation of their impoverishment. The so-called ethical fashion far too often reproduces conditions it claims to elevate; nowhere is this more visible to an anthropologist than in the emerging Indian luxury fashion, where designers catering to the local elites still do work intensely with craftspeople. The lotus, the beauty and luxury always depends for its existence on mud, dirt and poverty, and so it needs to (re)produce it. Luxury depends on sacrifice. Think of the fabulous tales of luxury, the tales of eyes going blind embroidering, or of Tibetan antelopes slaughtered for fleece for the legendary *shahtoosh* ring shawls, a symbol of power whose value has only increased since the trade has been illegalized (Nowell 2004).

## Fieldworking across luxury and dirt

The white lotus will take us on a journey across landscapes of dirt and luxury, as we will follow the material and immaterial production of *chikan* embroidery (Figure 0.2), from the villages surrounding Lucknow to the wealthy elite mourning in style in South Delhi. Unlike most anthropological studies devoted to descriptions of semi-homogenous segments of people and their lifeworlds, this book explores the relations and mutual production of people from diverse backgrounds tied together at various stages through the production and consumption of this luxury embroidery and the



**FIGURE 0.2** *Chikan* embroidery detail, a ninety-year-old piece from a private collection  
Image courtesy: Tereza Kuldova.