

DESIGNING INTERPASSIVE INDIANNESS FOR INDIA'S RICH¹

THE WORK OF AESTHETICS IN INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS WITH NATION AT A DISTANCE

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Abstract

Elite Indian fashion designers consciously attempt to abstract the essence of Indianness from India's numerous and geographically multiply localized crafts, turning their designs into a montage of exquisite handwork transgressing the local and representing the nation at large. Indian designer garments are pregnant with ideological meanings, sentiments and beliefs crafted for the consumption of India's transnational elite. However, the elite consumers have a troubled relationship with the nation; they are both proud of it and despise it, while feeling obliged to stage their love for it. Intimate relations with designer clothing imbued with nationalist sentiment enable the elite to 'objectively' present itself as nationalist and, through ethical consumption, also as moral. The garments then belong to the nation and believe for/on behalf of the wearer, thus the elite customer is relieved from his/her nationalist or moral obligation and can freely contemplate other loyalties as much as hatred towards the very same nation. This role of aesthetic consumption and of artistic nationalism is read through the lens of *interpassivity*, a theory developed by Robert Pfaller, one that resolves this ethnographic puzzle.

Keywords: Indian fashion, interpassivity, Robert Pfaller, nationalism, ethical business, belief

Author Biography

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¹ The article is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in New Delhi and Lucknow (2008, 2010-2013), which has resulted, among other publications, in the book *Luxury Indian Fashion: A Social Critique* (2016, London: Bloomsbury).

'The poor do not exist – not in our imagination, not in our movies or on our television screens. It is a passing phase, but for now we are incandescent with money'

(Desai 2010: 204)

This article focuses on the growing class of wealthy businessmen in New Delhi, and within this setting explores a particular dynamics that emerges at the intersection of fashion design, nationalism, economy and 'ethical business practices', and that translates into a dynamics between aesthetics and a structure of *belief*. It unravels the everyday playful reproductions of the currently popular ideological belief in the rise of India as a new economic global superpower, a globally well-known and well-established narrative and nationally celebrated illusion, one that at the same time nobody *really* seems to believe in; in Robert Pfaller's words, 'an illusion without owners' (Pfaller 2014). At a certain point during my fieldwork, I stopped counting how many times I heard that 'poverty does not exist in India'; they all knew better, yet they showed a touchy-feely devotion to this illusion that resonated like an echo in the elite circles. But of course, they would all at the same time sail on the current wave of ethical business and charitable action directed at the poor, but still, there were no poor and the selfless charity was a mere strategy of self-interest, but still, it made them feel good about themselves. And so, what they appeared to believe in would take situational twists and turns, but in each case a *distance* towards that belief had to be exhibited or implicitly understood and shared, indeed this distance was constitutive of these ideological identifications (Žižek 1989, Žižek 1998).

But back to the illusion of India's superpowerdom (Kuldova 2014); even popular books of think tankers, non-fiction writers and economic ideologues (or rather ideorogues) often begin with a sober summing up of the pervasive ills of Indian society, from poverty, ecologic crisis, caste discrimination, communal violence, lack of quality education, health care system, and so on, but then quickly move on to a discussion of the booming IT industry, the emergence of India's billionaires, scientists and professionals, and the youth and creativity of the nation and so on (e.g. Kamdar 2007, Das 2000). India likes to see itself and project itself to the world as confident, buzzing, hypermodern, developed and highly sophisticated. It has even its *India Brand Equity Foundation* (IBEF), a public-private partnership that sells India to the world, spreading positive economic perceptions of India globally. Of course, the poor are in the process expressly photoshopped, but still the poor artisan and farmer are the very heart of the nation!

Authors of these books as much as my elite interlocutors, who enthusiastically subscribe to these bombastic narratives, thus betray a quite particular structure of belief, one that can be summed up as, 'I know quite well, but still...'. Now the question is, how can an illusion that none of them *really* seem to believe in become so efficient, seductive, omnipresent and powerful, and where knowing better seems to reinforce the illusion instead of breaking it? And no less, how is this illusion enacted within concrete settings beyond the ordinary that are charged within enchanting and affective power, in settings that emerge as *play-spheres* (Huizinga 1955, Pfaller 2014)?

In order to contemplate this question, I wish to turn to quite particular instances of *enactment* of this ideology within such play-spheres and to the role of the ideology's aesthetic materialization in the form of opulent royal-like luxury garments created by the elite Indian fashion designers. Now why are these designer garments interesting as aesthetic objects doing the ideological work, or, and as we shall see, believing and belonging *for* their elite wearers, thus betraying a structure of *interpassivity* (Pfaller 2014, Pfaller 2003, Žižek 1989)? Before we delve into the ethnographic examples and the dynamics on the ground so to speak, let me briefly introduce you to the key contextual elements that we have to bear in mind when making sense of these events; firstly the obsession with an aesthetics that captures the *essence* of 'Indianness' (Kuldova 2013a, Kuldova 2013b) and secondly the role of *imagined economy* (Cameron and Palan 2004, Deshpande 1993, Wyatt 2005) for the construction of national belonging.

1. INDIANNESS: THE LACK IS THE STRENGTH

Indianness is the buzzword in contemporary Indian fashion design. All Indian designers these days know that if they do not attempt to capture the *essence* of being Indian in one way or the other in their designs, they are likely to be out of business, and so even the most extravagant and artistic designs often claim to express 'Indianness' (Kuldova 2016). The more blatantly and banally obvious this Indianness is, most often taking the form of heavy embellishments, craftwork and hand-woven cloth, the better. While the general popularity of traditional garments is nothing new to India, within the context of the fashion industry that emerged as a serious enterprise first after the neoliberal reforms of the 90s, heavily influenced by western fashion centres, this is a fairly recent phenomenon, dating back roughly to the 2008 post-financial crisis times. As India emerged victorious out of what was perceived to be a *global* crisis, the emphasis on the strength of India and Indianness has acquired a new layer of importance. The elites that used to look up to the West were suddenly struck by a revelation that went as follows, in words of one of my interlocutors: 'We have something that the West lacks, we have our heritage, our traditions, our Indian entrepreneurial spirit, our strength lies in our Indianness. We can possess the West, we can buy Dior or Gucci, but the West can never have what we have. (...) We have that little extra that will turn the world's tables'². This reimagined Indianness is thus something that is consciously directed at the (often invisible) global audience, it is the very leverage against the failing West and its crushing markets; it is the articulation of a 'positional superiority' over the West (Nader 1989: 326). Paradoxically, however, while working with Indian designers and their clientele, it became pressingly obvious that *this celebrated Indianness is precisely what the Indian elite lacks*.

As one of the leading designers once fittingly pointed out to me, 'our market is created by the lack, the void, by that which people desperately desire and want to be, but which they know they are not. (...) They come to us with the hope that we can fill this void and that we can transform them to what they believe they should be'³. While other designers tended not to be *as* eloquent, when speaking of their elite customers and their desire for Indianness, they used to mix in their English statements Hindi words such as *adhurapan* (incompleteness), or

² Excerpt from an interview with a CEO of an Indian multi-national company in New Delhi, August 2011.

³ From a conversation with Delhi based leading designer, June 2011.

khalipan (vacuum, emptiness). They took it as their mission to fill this void and engaged together with their customers in well-rehearsed celebrations of Indianness in their studios. We will get back to these encounters beyond the ordinary later on. For now, suffice it to say that this sense of lack they attempted to fill matched the pervasive obsession of my elite interlocutors with ‘being Indian at the *core*’, ‘at the heart’, as they used to say, ‘you have to be Indian first’. The injunction was clear: ‘you must be a true Indian!’. To the elites, largely perceived by the majority of India’s population as westoxicated, morally corrupt and driven by pure self-interest, staging of their Indianness became even more important, even if it was behind the closed door of elite settings, directed at an invisible Other. The high investments into the *repetitive* staging of Indianness precisely signify the lack of this elusive and continually escaping *essence* that is demanded to be possessed and displayed by the big Other, who appears to judge based on appearances (Pfaller 2014). It is worth noting that many designers often label their work *costume design*, suggesting that their designs are so *excessively* Indian that they are suitable only for special occasions, where the *promise* of these costumes to transform the wearer into an idealized self can be momentarily realized.

The *costumes* that these designers produce play with aesthetic referents of the pre-colonial Indian elite aiming to visually reconstruct India’s greatness by *citing* (Nakassis 2013) and *re-inscribing* (Cameron and Palan 2004) the symbolic and material worlds of the maharajas, nawabs and Mughal rulers and projecting them into the future, into India’s anticipated future (and present) as a global economic power, thus creating an aesthetics of power and wealth. What is at stake in Indian haute couture is then precisely the negotiation of the position of these elites, as distinctively Indian elites within a global space. The essence of Indianness and the current strength and potency of India is imagined to reside in India’s *heritage*, an increasingly popular concept among the elites; this heritage then needs to be flaunted, celebrated and personally cherished. The popularity of heritage has to be of course understood in relation to the global proliferation of heritage discourse largely stimulated by transnational organizations such as UNESCO, diverse national governmental schemes for crafts protection, rise of identity politics since the 70s and so on. The largely poor low class people making a living within the craft sector, India’s second largest sector of the economy, employing over 54 million people, are then essential for the elite’s project of filling the lack in their hearts. Yet their ‘polluting’ bodies have to be sanitized from the materiality of their products; the craftspeople have to be turned into an abstraction, into the very *heritage*, a symbol standing for the nation and tradition. They have to be projected in their bodily materiality into the past (Fabian 1983) and in their idealized abstractedness into the glorious future. Only in such a sanitized form can they become effective in the construction of this national narrative.

What is significant for us here about the presence of the craftspeople in this equation is that their impoverishment lends itself to the construction of the image of ‘ethical and socially responsible business’, at the same time as the wealthy elite can imagine itself to benevolently patronize these artisans along the line of the royals of the bygone era, the great patrons of arts and crafts. Thus, not only are the artisans key to the designers’ *artistic nationalism* (Winther-Tamaki 2001), but also to the dominant themes within the *imagined economy* central to the

construction of belonging to the Indian nation. This leads us to our second contextual point, namely the ways in which economy is imagined in India as constitutive of national belonging.

2. IMAGINED ECONOMY: ENTREPRENEUR-PHILANTHROPISTS AS NATIONAL HEROES

Benedict Anderson in his famous work on nationalism and imagined communities (Anderson 1990) surprisingly ignored the significance of economy in the construction of national narratives, yet in the Indian context, as Satish Deshpande has argued, economy is the *primary* source of raw material for the nationalist imagination in India (Deshpande 1993), something that at the same time creates an opening for the intermingling of global and national symbolism. The new myths of the imagined economy are *not* deterritorialized and denationalised, as some would argue (Cameron and Palan 2004), but certainly have international orientation (Wyatt 2005); they are about the way India wishes to be seen in the world. The celebrated rate of growth of Indian economy for instance serves as an ‘emblem of glory’ (Crane 1999) of India’s current imagined economy.

The role of economy is most obvious in the production of national heroes. We can take the example of the Tata family that features prominently in these narratives, spanning different economic eras of India’s past. The story begins with Jamsetji Tata who in the face of British resistance in 1907 began building India’s largest iron and steel work and was later labelled by Jawaharlal Nehru as one of the great founders of modern India and continues with the current celebration of the iconic Ratan Tata, who turned *Tata Sons* into the world’s 6th largest corporation and a powerful international player venturing into as diverse businesses as steel, luxury hotels, tea, salt, motors, chemicals, digital services and so on. Tata has become not only a national hero and a role model, but also the perfect symbol of the Indian imagined economy. Ratan Tata is not only every Indian entrepreneur’s idealized hero but also one of the most celebrated philanthropists, a devoted promoter of ‘capitalism with a human face’, who, as my interlocutors repeatedly pointed out to me, even influenced Bill Gates to go down the path of philanthropy. Guided by the spiritual wisdom of *Bhagavad-Gita*, Ratan Tata has established *Tata Trust*, one of the world’s most generous corporate trusts. Indeed, it is less known that *Tata Trust* has poured more cash into the *Harvard Business School* than into any educational institution within India, while protests against land grabs by the company across India and Africa are notoriously silenced. Within the realm of the imagined economy, corruption, illegal practices and notorious exploitation do not exist. *Tata Sons* regularly rank highest among the most trusted Indian companies, while the Indian spiritualism merged with business pragmatism produces yet again the very leverage and imagined superiority of India against the West. Being Indian at the core is thus central to doing business the specifically Indian ethical way. No less, since trusts like the *Tata’s* venture into the spheres like health care, education or clean water, entrepreneurs are increasingly hailed as the only truly effective solution to India’s problems, whereas the state is notoriously mocked as incompetent.

Thus, in the non-fiction bestseller *India Unbound*, Gurcharan Das (Das 2000) portrays the entrepreneurs as heroes, “these entrepreneurs are as mad as our medieval Rajputs who went to battle (...) when they knew in their hearts defeat was their only prize” (Das 2000: 294). In the

same way the Rajputs knew that they are going to die, and yet they believed they could really fight the enemy, the Indian businessmen know that the imagined economy is an illusion; they know that India is riddled by far too many problems, and that poverty really exists, that entrepreneurs are largely corrupt and that trusts and NGOs far too often do the job of money laundry, however that knowledge does not prevent them from acting as if they did not know and from showing a coterminous contempt and devotion to the illusion. In Delhi, the seat of national power, the reproduction of this illusion becomes even more important as the imagined economy has the power to promote consent and embed norms (Wyatt 2005); Delhi is a city where money rules and where politics is only making the path of the capital flow smoother, as the wealthy business elites lubricate the political elites with their money. And so even if they do not ‘believe in the bullshit about the nation’, as one of my interlocutors said, it appears that they still have to perform it for the others who are imagined to be the believers. The investments in the illusion of India as a new global superpower are high; thus the appearance has to be continually (re)produced, both materially and immaterially. Let us now move towards the concrete ways in which the lavishly Indian designer costumes end up believing for their owners and consuming the commodity of nationalism in place of the elite wearers.

DESIGNER STUDIO I: AN AFFECTIVE PLAY-SPHERE OF DEVOTION TO ILLUSION

Spending days in designer studios in South Delhi, I became very quickly bored. The initial excitement of an anthropologist entering a new field was soon replaced with a realization that whatever was going on inside these studios was highly repetitive and ritualized. Only rarely was the rehearsed script broken. The acts within the realm of the studio had to be viewed in terms of *ritualized action*, i.e. action that is “embodied, enacted, spatially rooted, temporarily bounded, prescribed, formalized, and repeated” (Grimes 2011: 13). The aesthetics of the designer studio, most often comprising of a mixture of luxurious interior, statues of gods, mirrors, art works, book shelves, throne-like chairs, chandeliers, mannequins, smell of incense sticks, suggestive music and so on, produced as its *excess* a particular *atmosphere* (Böhme 1993, Böhme 2010). This atmosphere was clearly inter-subjectively shared and extremely *affective*, in other words it had a phenomenological reality, a *Wirklichkeit* (as opposed to *Realität*) and as such this atmosphere set the studio *apart* from the ordinary world and turned it into a ritual space. The atmosphere was like a *web of sensation* (Gagliardi 1990: 18) to which the customers became prisoners the moment they entered the studio. Within this atmospheric space then, collective affects could emerge that could not be reduced to the individual bodies (Anderson 2009) or objects present. Almost all customers described their visits to the designer studios in terms of being transported into a different world. Indeed, the atmosphere set the stage for the play and was thus crucial to the creation of the *play-sphere* (Pfaller 2014, Huizinga 1955), where the so desired Indianness could be celebrated and the devotion to the illusion of the imagined economy enacted.

Let me provide you with two interconnected instructive examples of such an enactment, where the designer takes on the role of a guru, giving *darshan*⁴ (a sacred viewing) consecutively to two of his female customers. There is an air of secrecy surrounding Raghav's studio; he is an established and popular designer, who strategically chooses whom he allows to enter his sacred grounds and devote his time to. As he says, only customers with 'genuine interest in connoisseurship of Indian style and desire to learn' were allowed; of course their bank balance was what really mattered, but that would never be mentioned. That day he was meeting a new customer of his.

Anjali, a daughter of an industrialist in her early thirties, entered hectically the studio and before she even sat down, she managed to complain about the 'bloody traffic' in Delhi, the pollution, heat and all that noise. In the middle of her rant, Raghav stopped her and gestured that she should take a deep breath and relax, telling her that 'rants, aggression and complaints are not allowed inside the studio', thus establishing the rules of the game and the character of the space from the outset. Upon leaving few hours later, she indeed felt tremendously relaxed, rejuvenated and joyful. Raghav's plan for the day was to *celebrate* India and Indianness with her, since he felt that she was a 'little too westoxicated and needed an Indian fix'. She too explicitly desired to 'reconnect with her roots' and 'work that traditional look', since, as Raghav filled in her words, 'it was imperative to project the right image of the *powerful* and *proud* India'. Then he decided to give her a lecture on India's craft traditions, pulling out encyclopedic books on Indian textiles and his own collection of antique sample pieces. He would mix in stories of his favorite maharajas and maharanis and Anjali all of a sudden disappeared in her own fantasy world of Indian opulence, while touching all the exquisite museum-like pieces in Raghav's collection and constantly demanding to see more. Raghav's "commercially inflected nationalism" (Bhachu 2004: 75) was doing its magic as Anjali was becoming increasingly sentimental, nostalgic and emotional. At that moment, Raghav proposed that she tried on one of his recent creations, a *rani* pink *lehenga* (long skirt), heavily embroidered in gold metal wire, with Swarovski crystals and a very modest long sleeved blouse with a light contrasting *dupatta* (big scarf). While she was dressing up, Raghav increased the volume and the room became filled with traditional sitar music, then, when she emerged from the changing room, he held her shoulders from the back, looking into the large golden mirror, whispering into her ear, 'look at you, a perfect Indian beauty'. She indeed looked like the perfect virtuous woman, a peculiarly elitist mother India, but mother India nonetheless - modest and obedient, yet at the same time able to conquer the globe while remaining 'essentially' Indian (Parameswaran 2004). The look on Anjali's face suddenly changed and she was all demure, moving slowly with her gaze lowered. She knew exactly how to embody the desirable image of an Indian woman, after all she has rehearsed in front of her relatives and others so many times before, but this time, this time she was truly touched inside. Even though she considered herself a tough and independent woman, who even travels alone and makes it in the male dominated Indian business world, inside the affective atmosphere of the studio she suddenly fell prey to the seductive trappings of the patriarchal

⁴ *Darshan* translates as sight or vision, and is commonly used to describe Hindu worship, the act of seeing and being seen by the deity. The word is however also used beyond the realm of the divine, referring to something akin to audience with a revered and important person, be it a guru, a politician or recently a fashion designer. The association with the devotion to and veneration of the given person is still implicit in such a usage.

ideology. Indeed, “subjects carry on doing the symbolic performances of ideological ceremonies (...) because they engender a partial satisfaction, what Žižek terms ‘surplus enjoyment’; there is an unconscious enjoyment in subjection, in yielding and obeying – and being seen yielding and obeying – to the rules of ideology” (Gook 2011: 18). Anjali truly enjoyed succumbing to the ideal, running around the studio, from a mirror to mirror and contemplating herself in different *poses of modesty*, she even forced me to take a picture of her that she would post on Instagram with a hashtag *#staytrueIndian*.

Anjali’s state of being moved and touched by the national sentiment enacted in the studio was possible precisely due to the *staged* character of the encounter between her and Raghav, within a particularly suitable affective atmospheric setting. The fact that “the psychic intensity produced during play (...) is greater than the extent of affect that appears otherwise in life” (Pfaller 2014), became fairly obvious when I met Anjali a month later at a wedding in Jaipur, where she was wearing Raghav’s creation. Weddings are also staged affairs of largely staged emotions, following prescribed rites and ritualized practices, with appropriate demeanour. Even weddings are theatrical stages artificially erected in the middle of the everyday flow of ordinary life; and high on emotion and drama. However, when a play has a recognized cultural function, such as in the case of the wedding, it is bound with notions of duty and obligation (Huizinga 1955), this makes it a different sort of play to that which happens behind the closed door of the rather secretive designer studio, where the intensity of emotion connected to the illusion can be freely played out and one can more easily fool oneself into believing that he/she really believes. But back to Anjali, the moment she leaves the wedding stage where she acts as the demure Indian woman dressed up in tradition from head to toe, and escapes through the back entry to the parking lot, where a group of men is drinking, smoking, telling dirty jokes and so on, she immediately begins mocking both the uncomfortable *costume* and the whole business of pretending to be a modest woman, touching feet of all the elders and so on. And so she begins her rant: ‘I am fucking fed up of touching feet of all these *budhas* (oldies, derogatory), most of them are bloody corrupt illiterates. Give me a smoke dude, else I fucking die, for real’. Anjali’s transgressive smoke, especially for her being a non-smoker, was precisely the necessary act of distancing. Indeed, any “ideological identification relies on its transgression, on some mode of taking distance” (Žižek 1998: 3). In a similar way, she would occasionally make remarks about Raghav outside the designer studio, such as ‘*voh toh bahut bakwas bolta hai*’ (he talks a lot of crap) in order to make sure that I understand that she knows that he does it all for money, still, she would be paying him in *lakhs* (hundreds of thousands rupees) and feel rejuvenated.

It is here that *interpassivity* steps in. The belief in tradition and in being truly Indian is delegated to the *costume*. The situation is parallel to the example of the functioning of the Tibetan prayer wheel given by Slavoj Žižek. A Tibetan prayer “wheel itself is praying for me, instead of me – or, more precisely, I myself am praying through the medium of the wheel. The beauty of it is that in my psychological interior I can think about whatever I want, I can yield to the most dirty and obscene fantasies, and it does not matter because – to use a good old Stalinist expression – whatever I am thinking, objectively I am praying” (Žižek 1989: 34). The designer garment thus both believes for Anjali at the same time as it consumes for her the

commodity of national belonging and Anjali while on the wedding stage can think all the thoughts about the sleazy uncles, corrupt politicians pretending to be honest and other perverts present. The garment respects the elders for her.

At the same time however, she was extremely emotional during the wedding ceremonies and cried her way through the moment when the bride was ritually crying when leaving her parent's home forever (and for the honeymoon). So while on one hand she, like everyone else, despised the event and hated all the pretensions and was waiting only to escape and get some vodka shots in the parking lot, she loved the event at the same time in her devotion to the illusion of idealized Indianness and tradition, thus pointing to the fundamental ambivalence of the structure of belief and the pleasure/displeasure taken in it.

An interesting aspect of these staged events was revealed to me when I attended another wedding, where the marriage was arranged to a man the bride has never seen before, while the bride was in love with someone else. When the bride was supposed to ritually cry in order to elicit the particular emotion in the audience, she cried for real. This turned out to be extremely problematic. The point about the staged crying of the bride is that *it must be staged*; only staged crying of the bride, when everyone knows that in reality she is looking forward to the honeymoon, can elicit intense emotions and identification with the situation according to the cultural script. The genuine tears that she was shedding had no power to elicit compassion, or the right emotion in the audience. Instead, she was told to cry only *as if*, not to cry for real and she was labelled a drama queen, unnecessarily overacting. So where on one hand the first bride was instructed to shed as authentic tears as possible, the second bride was told to shed fake tears. The real tears were absolutely ineffective and only very close friends would be able to sympathize, most guests were indifferent, and few turned all of a sudden aggressive. The groom's father even passed a comment to the bride's father that he 'better control that bitch'. What set the aggressivity in motion in the audience was when the bride, through whom the audience was supposed to enjoy the dramatic cultural moment, cried for real, i.e. disturbed the functioning of the transference, of enjoying through the Other (Žižek 1998). Indeed the situation is in some way parallel to that when the typical popular hero of action masala movies, a truly honest policeman (e.g. *Singham* /2011/), arrives at his new posting in the most villain prone area and solely by doing his duty shakes up the whole system, disposing of the criminals and corrupt police that has been living off these criminals, while acting *as if* they were the good guys – and for whom only the uniform was 'objectively' doing the police duty. Indeed, this matches the everyday experience, where, most often than not, you have to bribe the policeman into doing his work, as if his salary covers merely showing up every day in the uniform.

DESIGNER STUDIO II: STAGING ETHICAL BUSINESS AND REDEMPTION

Let me now proceed to my last example that reconnects the imagined economy with the practices inside the emotionally charged space of the designer studio. The same day in the afternoon an older customer of Raghav's, Geeta, a woman in mid-forties, a marketing manager and a wife of a CEO of a company dealing in technologies of green energy imported from China, came in. She was supposed to give a talk about India's sustainable future and she

wanted to project the right image of powerful Indian womanhood, ‘something between Sonia Gandhi and Madhuri Dixit’ (politician and actress respectively). Apparently a beneficial merger could take place that evening and her husband was relying on her to project an image of trust and confidence to complement his own efforts; and since she was a little superstitious, as she said, she imagined that if Raghav with his magical hands created something for her, it could bring her luck and of course, she would bless the piece in the temple the day before. She demanded Raghav drew some design on paper, but he argued that it would not be necessary, as what she was looking for was really the traditional *sari*, in white and gold silk *khadi* and for the touch of glamour some subtle white *chikan* and gold *zardozi* embroidered border and a long-sleeved blouse, in deep green. After some arguing back and forth about the details and the choice, she finally agreed to this in her view rather simple sari. But then she asked about the price and when Raghav mentioned 70 000INR (900EUR), she got visibly offended, claiming that it was just a rather simple sari and wanted the price cut down. Raghav just replied that she should know the rules by now; that price is non-negotiable. But she continued resisting, and so, to make his point, Raghav dragged her to his workshop at the back of the building, the perfect juxtaposition to the designer space – shabby, with bad lightning and *betel* stains on the wall, where some of his *zardozi* workers were embroidering. Raghav instructs her in a harsh voice, ‘now look at them, I mean, look at them carefully’. She peeps into the workshop briefly and says with annoyance, ‘I have seen places like that before, what is the point here?’ Raghav softens a little, ‘darling, how can you be so heartless? You ask me why I want that money, it is because of them, I have a responsibility and I have to take care of them’. Standing in the door, not willing to step inside the room, she got even more annoyed, ‘please, don’t try this “I am helping the poor *kinda* attitude”, it won’t work’. But Raghav did not give up so easily and continued, ‘well, you can bargain with me, but you should not bargain with them’. The conversation went on for a while, and since she knew better she kept on refusing to pay such a high amount. Then Raghav decided to pull out his best card and dragged her back into the seductive realm of the studio taking along a small kid, Raju. Raghav was determined to make this ‘heartless woman’ connect with his ‘workers’, positioning himself as a benevolent designer taking the cause of upliftment from poverty seriously. To prove the point, he switched to Hindi and began interviewing Raju, an obviously rehearsed act that he successfully pulled off in front of other of his customers before. Raju told a moving story of how his father died, leaving his mother alone with him and his two younger brothers. When his mother turned for help to her brother, he said he could not take the burden and kicked her out. She was miserable for months until she accidentally knocked on Raghav’s doors. This is where Raghav took over Raju’s story and shifted back to English, saying ‘looking into the mother’s eyes, and the kids around her’, he felt that he could not throw her out; he decided to help and gave her work and enrolled Raju in a local school, and began training him in *zardozi*. The act took over her and she began to melt. Then Raghav turned back to Raju and asked him to confirm his benevolent deeds. Raju said in the most *filmi* style, ‘*Raghav saheb hamare liye bhagvan jaisa hai* (Raghav Sir is like a God to us)’. Suddenly the Ravi Shankar’s sitar raga playing in the background gained a whole new meaning; everything was intensified, at the same time as slowed down. Geeta ended up hugging the little boy with a tear in her eye, just what Raghav wanted. The presence of the little boy, dressed in worn out clothes, his *chappals* (sandals) fixed with a plastic tape,

munching on his biscuit, sitting on the antique sofa and calling Raghav his god, inside the lavish museum-like studio, certainly created a ‘spectacular’ atmosphere. In this extraordinary staged moment, the normally carefully maintained class and pollution boundaries were transgressed. In the end, Geeta apologized to Raghav and was suddenly more than willing to pay for the redemption from her privilege, to pay in order to clear her conscience. Raghav won the bargain game. What became apparent here is that “*with the help of games, it is possible to compel people to feel guilty*” (Pfaller 2014: , emphasis in original) and to capitalize on their guilt. This event appealing to the ideology of ethical business and capitalism with human face could at the same time be viewed as a coerced game, wherein the customer took great pleasure in both the guilt and the redemption. Geeta herself pointed out to me that she re-emerged as ‘a new person’, her ‘eyes were opened’ and she ultimately felt ‘reborn’. At the same time, she was always the first to claim that charity was all about business, self-interest, and public image, but still... .

The intense affective atmosphere that suddenly emerged in the studio, transgressed the boundaries between the material, corporeal and social, creating a space of *resonance* (Anderson 2009) that would be impossible outside the studio, a space of play with all its sacred seriousness (Pfaller 2014, Huizinga 1955). Raghav himself got partly seduced by his own act and in order to keep his distance, once Geeta was gone, he gave Raju a tight slap when sending him back to the workshop to make up for the lost time. Similarly, Geeta did not even know the name of any of her servant’s children that she had cleaning her house for the past ten years, but she kept remembering Raju and even decided to use his example in the talk she was giving few weeks later on corporate social responsibility and green energy in front of the elite business community, of course yet another play-sphere within which the ideology of the imagined economy with its entrepreneur-philanthropist heroes would be enacted, an illusion no one really believed in, but one that could warm their hearts and pave the path to their redemption by way of patriotic duty. Raju, *as an effect of the affective play*, became ‘a treasure to be retained in memory’ (Huizinga 1955).

Indeed all these games appear to be, in Robert Pfaller’s words, far “more fascinating than even life’s positive aspects because” they unite “both positive and negative aspirations, adding them together (...) precisely because the game is ‘nonsense’ in their eyes, a mere game, and because they therefore disdain and hate the game (while simultaneously loving it, whether for the suspended illusion that is presented in it or for the repeal of such), they fall under its spell” (Pfaller 2014: , emphasis in original).

CONCLUSION

Throughout this brief exposition, we have seen that the beliefs in certain versions of the world among the elites are always riddled with *ambivalence*, where the constitutive distance of the belief has to be frantically maintained at all times. The designer garments were designed such as to symbolically represent an elitist belonging to the nation at the same time as projecting the image of powerful elitist Indianness directed at the invisible global Other and the future. By way of this aesthetics they served the to relieve the wearers from the constant pressure to be and behave Indian and enable them to, largely unconsciously, delegate his/her belief onto

the garment and contemplate other loyalties, disloyalty or ways to evade taxes, use charity trusts and NGOs to launder money and to make sure that a class of needy childlike poor lacking in creativity and imagination is effectively reproduced. But still, they can believe that they act absolutely patriotically, selflessly and that their transnational business ventures are the key to India's glorious future, one that shall mirror its glorious past. After all, that is what they 'objectively' believe in, displaying it on their bodies. Their nation is then kept at a distance, while covering most intimately their naked body.

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