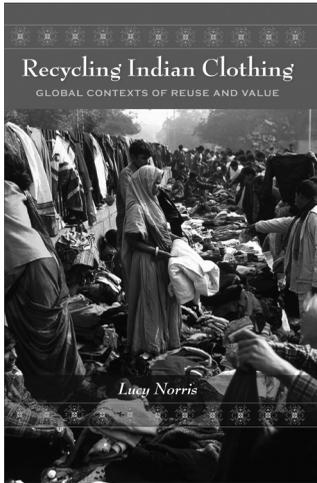


Heather Blackmore

Book Review: Lucy Norris, *Recycling Indian Clothing: Global Contexts of Reuse and Value*

University of Indiana Press, 2010.  
\$24.95 (paperback)



In *Recycling Indian Clothing: Global Contexts of Reuse and Value*, Lucy Norris charts the trajectory of Indian clothing from the intimate confines of the wedding trousseau and personal wardrobe out into the larger economies inherent to flea markets, tourism, and the trade in “exotic” global exports. Norris first introduces the relatively recent New Delhi suburb of Trans-Yamuna, where she lived for a year in a housing society that she has dubbed “the Progressive.” This housing society forms the locus of her research, which begins with a sample of the one hundred families living in the society, and gradually moves outward to their networks of extended family, friends, and acquaintances. Norris initially probes her subjects’ attitudes toward clothing, its care, its preservation, and concerns about the relationship of the maintenance of family wardrobes to larger concerns about family well-being. Norris positions cloth as a relational object, both intrinsic to the process of identity-building and able to assume properties of the wearer. She stresses the importance of gift-giving to the accumulation of a woman’s wardrobe, and thus, the ways that her larger network of family, close friends, and contacts is reflected in the development of her own identity through her wardrobe.

Norris then goes on to examine the problems posed by excessive wardrobes, the prevalence of which she attributes predominantly to the dramatic rise in consumerism following the opening of the Indian market in the early 1990s. Other major factors that have also contributed to the swelling size of Indian wardrobes are the decrease in extended family living in favor of smaller, nuclear family houses and apartments, reducing the channels through which Indian women would have traditionally passed along out-grown and unwanted clothes, as well as the glut of choices on the market with the increase of available Western clothing styles and the shortening of fashion cycles in the market. Through interviews with the women who allow her into their homes and closets, Norris investigates the attitudes of Indian women toward recycling worn-out clothing within the home, as emotionally significant garments are frequently recycled to create clothes for younger generations within the family, simultaneously utilizing the (frequently very valuable) cloth as a resource to be recycled while also enfolding loved ones in the auspicious energies of respected and successful earlier generations. Less significant cloth is frequently recycled to make baby diapers and rags

for use in the home, so that all possible value is extracted from cloth before it is discarded. Norris suggests, however, that these channels are proving increasingly inadequate for dealing with the excess of clothing in modern Indian households.

From the localized domestic struggle of women attempting to free their homes from a glut of unworn, outgrown, and otherwise unwanted clothing, Norris expands her study outward to examine the massive commercial trade in used clothes in India. She works to connect the many thousands of used garments found in the weekly market in the New Delhi suburb of Ragubir Nagar—which turns out to be the central hub of the (very substantial) used garment trade in North India—to the homes of the women who, within a culture that frowns upon passing personal garments on to strangers, largely deny that they give away or sell unwanted clothes outside of the family. Norris charts the multi-valued concerns surrounding the disposal of used clothes, which, as very intimate possessions coming in daily contact with the body, are thought to contain elements of the former owner. This intimacy is cherished as clothes are handed down within the family, eventually reaching the family servants who are simultaneously inside the family but also lower in station, making them suitable recipients for clothing too worn or stained for family use. This hierarchy of clothing disposal becomes troubled however when certain garments are deemed “too good for the maid” (silk saris or party clothes) or when larger quantities of clothing must be purged. At this point, many women are forced to deal with the *bartanwale*, door-to-door used clothes traders who barter shiny new pots and kitchen utensils, or *bartan*, for used clothes. The removal of used clothes from the family is a process loaded with concerns about the potential uses or misuses of the clothes and the energies that may be attached from their former owners, as well as generally mistrustful ideas about both the poor and donating to charity. The *bartanwale*, typically from a caste of people called the Wagri, provide a discreet option for women to rid their homes of unwanted clothing while adding to the wealth of the domestic sphere through the acquisition of desirable objects.

Continuing to follow the movements of the clothing out of the home and into the market in the hands of the *bartanwale*, Norris examines the diverse network of economies providing clothes for India’s poor as well as for the manufacture of goods from industrial wipers and rags to souvenirs and high fashion exotic recycled clothing to be marketed to India’s elite as well as in Europe and the US.

Norris’s linkage of the individual worn or stained garments found in the home to the massive economy that works to transform and profit from these unwanted goods is compelling, readable, and well researched. This work also catalogues a wealth of Indian cultural attitudes toward cloth and clothing, giving and receiving, reuse, pollution, and rebirth. However, as an economic analysis, cultural study, and material history, certain aspects of Norris’s study and related issues are given too little attention as its scope grows larger in an attempt to follow cloth out of the home, to various venues throughout India, and then into the further reaches of the world. Consumption and the selection and acquisition of goods in a modern Indian context are given minimal consideration, producing an image of the Indian home so focused on the giving, receiving, and trading of goods that it ignores the equally relevant role of the woman as a consumer navigating the marketplace and selecting the products that will eventually make up the body of items to be recycled.

One of the great values of this text is its repository of specific cultural attitudes toward clothing and inheritance, and the relationship of materials to the body, as well as broader considerations about identity and the roles of practical and symbolic goods important to the field of material culture. Norris’s work also reveals the very conflicted notions that some of her subjects hold toward acts of charitable giving and the donation of unwanted items to the needy. The *bartanwale* are a unique subculture at the center of these conflicted attitudes and customs about old and new, rich and poor, and domestic and industrial. Norris’s chapter on the *bartanwale* focuses on the private interactions through which kitchen goods are traded for unwanted clothes, but the *bartanwale* remain some of the most unique and intriguing figures of the text and their customs and

## RECYCLING INDIAN CLOTHING BOOK REVIEW

practices demand a more exhaustive cultural study. Norris probes many fruitful ideas that warrant more extensive investigation across a wider body of participants, but the scope of the text limits the attention that each component receives.

*Recycling Indian Clothing* is, on the whole, an adept and useful picture of the channels through which intimate and tactile objects are recycled and

transformed into new products for the global market, reversing assumptions about the flow of waste from the West into the rest of the world. The text takes on cultural studies and industrial analysis in an ambitious portrait of cloth as it moves off the body and out of the home into local, national, and global markets, encountering different valences of significance and meaning with each change of hands.

---

**Heather Blackmore** is a Ph.D. student at the University of Southern California. Her research is concerned with the study of haptic and affective qualities in media, perceptions of space, and film programming and exhibition.