EMBODYING PROSPERITY

HOW HANDSPUN AND HANDWOVEN PATTU TEXTILES REFLECT SUSTAINABLE FASHION AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN WESTERN RAJASTHAN

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Abstract

This paper explores India's agropastoral desi oon (wool) textile traditions and their significance in embodying prosperity, focusing on hand-spun and handwoven Pattu textiles. Pattu is a multifunctional textile—used as a shawl, skirt, blanket, mat, or rain cover—valued for its durability and warmth in desert climates. The word "Pattu" derives from patti, meaning narrow-width fabric, woven on pit treadle looms (Khaddi) (Rustagi, 2021). Two narrow strips (pattis) are stitched together to form a blanket or shawl (Munshi et al., 1992). Grounded in Indigenous and Local Ecological Knowledge (ILEK), Pattu's making involves intergenerational hand-spinning, weaving, and embroidery practices. These textiles not only reflect the ecological rhythms of desert life but also sustain a meaningful relationship between communities and their environment. Crafted from locally sourced desi oon, Pattu embodies both ecological sustainability and cultural identity (Jaitly, 1990). By exploring embedded skills, seasonal rhythms, and collaborative production, this paper highlights how Pattu supports rural livelihoods, preserves intangible cultural heritage, and fosters community resilience. In an era of climate crisis and industrialized fashion, Pattu offers a culturally rooted, sustainable alternative that reconnects people, place, and practice.

Keywords: *Embodied knowledge, Indigenous and Local Ecological Knowledge (ILEK), Desi Oon (wool), Community resilience, Ethical and local production*

INTRODUCTION

Desert Textile Culture, Village, Craft, and Ecological Practices The unstitched, off-the-loom desi oon textiles known as Pattu are a traditional craft deeply embedded in the village social and ecological systems of Western Rajasthan, India. These textiles exemplify environmental sustainability, community resilience, and economic viability within rural/village economies. Crafted from indigenous wool, Pattu represents "prosperity fashion" by connecting clothing to nature, community, and ethical production practices (Latouche, 2012). The production of Pattu reflects the interdependence of communities, emphasizing collective labor, ecological stewardship, and the preservation of generational knowledge—elements crucial for sustaining both cultural heritage and local ecosystems. As Edward Cooke notes, the term "village," when associated with craft, evokes connotations of cohesion, cooperative labor, and collective production, distinct from industrial systems. Dating back to the late nineteenth century, this association underscores the localized, small-scale production methods that define traditional crafts. Within this global framework, craftwork occupies a niche as a place-specific commodity, produced outside urban centres by identifiable makers who rely on skill and dexterity rather than industrial machinery. (Helland;2014, p.2)

Pattu exemplifies this framework by embodying knowledge that seamlessly integrates Indigenous and Local Ecological Knowledge

(ILEK) with traditional crafting practices. Rooted in community-based agricultural systems, Pattu production reflects a profound understanding of the land, livestock, and farming practices. Skilled craftsmanship transforms raw wool into versatile, handwoven fabric, showcasing the interconnectedness of ecological systems and human effort. This knowledge, sustained through intergenerational collaboration, positions Pattu as both a functional textile and a symbolic representation of community resilience and ecological harmony.

Historically, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, decentralized manufacturing systems in India, China, and Japan dominated global textile and ceramic markets, relying on skilled labor and well-established technologies. However, during the colonial period, British manufacturers marginalized these systems, promoting a false narrative of inefficiency to celebrate industrialized production. This erasure, as Prasannan Parthasarathi explains through the concept of "the great divergence," elevated Western technology while devaluing Asian/South Asian craftsmanship. In the context of today's global climate crisis—marked by rapid industrialization, fast fashion, and accumulating textile waste—revisiting ILEK and sustainable craft practices has become increasingly urgent. This paper uses Pattu textiles as a case study to explore the significance of embodied knowledge and sustainable craft traditions, demonstrating their relevance in addressing contemporary environmental and social challenges.

CRAFTED HISTORIES: COTTON AND WOOL (DESI OON) IN INDIAN TEXTILES

Indian textiles, such as Khadi and Chintz, represent India's rich legacy in cotton craftsmanship, offering a striking contrast to the localized resilience of wool-based traditions like Pattu Textiles. Khadi, a handspun and handwoven fabric championed by Mahatma Gandhi during the independence movement, became a symbol of self-reliance and sustainability. It empowered rural/village communities while standing in opposition to British industrialized textiles (Gandhi, 1927). On the other hand, Chintz—originally a hand-drawn and dyed fabric from India—has evolved over the past century to denote floral-printed, glazed cotton furnishing fabrics. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Chintz dominated global markets, showcasing India's exceptional innovation and craftsmanship in cotton textiles (Riello & Roy, 2009). These cotton traditions underscore India's dual legacy of resistance and artistry, while contrasting with the equally vital, localized practices embodied by woolen textiles like Pattu.

In the early 20th century, Gandhi mobilized the cotton industry as a political tool against colonial exploitation. He encouraged Indians to produce and wear Khadi as a boycott of British goods and a symbol of unity and independence (Bayly, 1986). However, the plain, coarse fabric often overlooked the intricate artistry and decorative traditions that had once made Indian textiles globally celebrated (Parthasarathi, 2011).

The fascination with Indian textiles is not new. Fourteenth-century English writer and traveler Sir John Mandeville, known more for his imaginative storytelling than reliable observations, described a "wonderful tree which bore tiny lambs on the ends of its branches." This depiction of the cotton plant, fantastical as it was, reflected Europe's fascination with Indian cotton, which was often seen as one of the marvels of the Orient. Such narratives, while mythical, underscore the allure and global significance of Indian textiles throughout history. (Riello & Roy, 2009).

While cotton has historically represented India's role in global trade and colonial resistance, wool-based textiles like Pattu offer a localized counterpoint. Rooted in Indigenous and Local Ecological Knowledge (ILEK), Pattu integrates land, livestock, and skilled craftsmanship, emphasizing community-driven, sustainable practices (Latouche, 2012). Together, these textiles highlight India's dual legacy: cotton as a symbol of global influence and resistance, and wool as an emblem of place-based production and ecological harmony. Both traditions offer critical insights for sustainable fashion and cultural preservation in contemporary times (Parthasarathi, 2011).

TEXTILE CRAFT AS A LIVING ARCHIVE: MEMORY, MATERIALITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Culturally, Indian states with arid or semi-arid geographies are deeply interconnected through their agropastoral knowledge and wool textile traditions, firmly rooted in Indigenous and Local Ecological Knowledge (ILEK). These traditions are vital to the livelihoods of pastoral communities, illustrating a symbiotic relationship between

craft and ecology. In the west, the Thar Desert in Rajasthan and the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat are renowned for their distinctive wool crafts, which play a crucial role in sustaining pastoralist economies (CFP Report, 2022). In the north, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Ladakh preserve wool weaving traditions closely tied to mountain pastoralism and transhumance practices (Ladon,2023). Similarly, in southern India, the Deccan Plateau, spanning Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, integrates pastoralist wool production with a rich and diverse textile heritage (Mehta, 2023).

Textiles occupy a central place among Indian arts and crafts, as highlighted by the establishment of a dedicated Ministry of Textiles. This underscores the importance of textiles in Indian society and their recognition at the governmental level. Despite challenges from industrial mass production and competition with emerging textile-producing nations, Indian handmade textiles have preserved their unique beauty and cultural significance. India's textile industry remains one of the largest globally, benefiting from an unparalleled raw material base and a strong manufacturing infrastructure across the economic value chain. This resilience showcases the enduring strength and global relevance of Indian textiles, encompassing both traditional handwoven masterpieces and contemporary innovations (Sethi, 2022).

PLANETARY CONNECTION OF PATTU TEXTILES THROUGH SPATIAL AND SUSTAINABLE CLOTHING PRACTICES FROM INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE (ILEK) LENS

THEORIZING INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE: INSIGHTS FROM HANDSPUN AND HANDWOVEN PATTU TEXTILES

Indigenous and Local Ecological Knowledge (ILEK) is shaped through dynamic interactions among humans, non-human entities, technical artifacts, and the living and non-living elements of nature (Spaargaren, Weenink, & Lamers, 2016). In practice theory, knowledge is understood as "enacted," existing only through action. Tacit knowledge, or practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984), plays a vital role in the (re)production of such practices (Ignatow, 2007). Tacit knowledge is inherently practical, tied to accomplishing tasks within specific ecological and social conditions, and resists abstraction (Polanyi, 2005; Gascoigne & Thornton, 2013).

This framework resonates with pastoralist community in India who creates its own unique set of 'storied textiles' (Das & Iyengar, 2021, p. 66). These textiles, such as Pattu, are not mere functional objects but embody cultural, historical, and practical significance within pastoralist communities. The idea of "storied" captures the intertwining of knowledge, tradition, and identity with material craftsmanship. Pattu textiles are artifacts of lived experience, reflecting the human nature relationships and craftsmanship central to pastoral communities' heritage. By weaving together tacit knowledge and lived ecological practices, these textiles encapsulate both the tangible and intangible dimensions of tradition, serving as living narratives of communal resilience and ecological harmony.

Rooted in intergenerational knowledge and place-based practices, Pattu textiles offer a sustainable alternative to industrial fashion systems by integrating craft, ecology, and community. Their production relies on the interdependence of pastoralist, hand-spinning, and weaving communities, where livestock such as sheep and goats play a vital role in agro-economic life. This sustainable model reflects what Arturo Escobar (2018) describes as the *pluriverse*—a world where multiple ways of knowing and being coexist. By foregrounding Indigenous ecological knowledge, Pattu challenges modernist paradigms and affirms culturally rooted approaches to sustainability.

By examining Pattu-making practices through the lens of ILEK, we also uncover their relevance in addressing contemporary challenges like climate change. These communities' migratory practices, shaped by seasonal fluctuations such as Himalayan snowfall or desert rainfall, illustrate adaptability and resilience essential for navigating environmental uncertainties (Centre for Pastoralism, 2022). Their ecological strategies, blending practical and economic wisdom, offer valuable insights for fostering sustainability and climate resilience globally. Incorporating local wool and traditional practices into broader textile systems can inspire a more sustainable and diverse future for fashion. The ecological knowledge embedded in Pattu textiles and the cultures that create them is deeply relational and situated, transmitted

through communal, ritualized learning (Fletcher, Pierre, & Tham, 2019). These practices bridge the gap between tradition and innovation, offering a profound understanding of natural systems often overlooked by modern, dualistic frameworks.

VISUAL APPROACHES AND TACIT KNOWLEDGE IN THE PRACTICE OF PATTU CRAFT

According to Sennett (2008, pp. 8-9), craftsmanship embodies "the skill of making things well… an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake." Ingold (2000, p. 413) further elaborates that craftsmanship involves inspiration, engagement, holistic understanding, informal learning, and the honing of skills necessary for completing a task. These scholars highlight the integral role of skill in craftsmanship, which Ingold defines as a "practical mastery that we carry in our bodies and that is refractory to formulation in terms of any system of mental rules and representation" (Ingold, 2000, p. 162). This tacit knowledge is cultivated not through formal training but through routine practices, involving characteristic postures and gestures that are embodied over time.

This framework aligns closely with the practices involved in creating handspun and handwoven Pattu textiles. Among farming and pastoral communities, women routinely engage in handspinning during the afternoons, using Charkhas (spinning wheels) to transform raw, hand-carded sheep wool into uniform yarn. This yarn is then passed to the weaver's family, where the entire household collaborates on pit looms to craft the Pattu fabric. Due to the loom's structural limitations, the fabric is woven in narrow strips called Patti. Two strips are later joined using hand embroidery, giving the textile its name, Pattu. Once the woven fabric returns to the spinner's hands, it undergoes further enhancement. Two pieces are sewn together, and borders are embroidered with vibrant colors. In the Thar Desert, these bright borders add a sense of individuality, while others may complement the natural wool's natural tones. This interplay of spinning, weaving, and embroidery illustrates the seamless integration of tacit knowledge and visual methods in the crafting process.

EMBODIED SKILLS AND COLLABORATIVE TOOLS IN THE MAKING OF PATTU TEXTILES

The sustainable relationship between makers and the natural environment they rely on is encapsulated in the concept of co-production. Co-production emphasizes the mutual involvement and interdependence between humans, animals, and their surrounding ecosystems, generating ecological services and benefits (Fischer & Eastwood, 2016). This framework expands the understanding of social-ecological interactions, acknowledging the agency of both humans and non-humans, rather than perceiving them solely as providers or users of ecological resources (Flint et al., 2013). Craftsmanship, deeply rooted in "attentiveness," thrives on practices such as "handling, using, and taking care of things" (Crawford, 2009, p.69), fostering an "intimacy" with materials, animals, and plants (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, p. 210).

The making of handwoven Pattu textiles exemplifies this co-productive relationship. Pastoralist and farming communities are intricately tied to their livestock, such as sheep, goats, and camels. These animals provide essential resources like wool, milk, and meat, while their routines shape the rhythms and structures of craft practices. Livestock cycles directly influence the timing of work, embedding Pattu-making within the ecological rhythms of the community.

Pattu-making seamlessly integrates intergenerational participation with embodied skills, where tacit knowledge acquired through lived experience, visual observation, and hands-on practice forms the foundation of this craft. Women often spin wool in the afternoons, transforming raw fibers into uniform yarn, while weaving and embroidery engage entire families in the production process. Tools like the Charkha (spinning wheel) and handloom serve as collaborative instruments, bringing together generations in the crafting of Pattu textiles. This intergenerational cooperation not only ensures the functionality of these textiles but also preserves their cultural significance, keeping traditions alive and relevant across time.

Through these embodied practices, Pattu textiles represent the interconnectedness of humans, non-humans, and the environment. This dynamic sustains local economies while safeguarding cultural heritage rooted in resilience, ecological awareness, and collective craftsmanship. By embodying co-production, Pattu-making serves as

a compelling model for sustainable craft practices that honor the interdependence of nature and culture.

In contrast, modern or industrial societies often experience a nature-deficit disorder (Louv, 2005), a disconnect from the natural world that impairs the "ecological conscience that motivates care and action" (Zylstra et al., 2014, p. 123). The embodied knowledge and intimate connection with nature inherent in Pattu-making traditions provide a counterpoint to this deficit, offering a blueprint for rekindling ecological relationships through meaningful, place-based practices.

The use of indigenous wool enhances the resilience of desert ecosystems by leveraging its natural adaptability. This interconnected ecosystem unites artisans—spinners, weavers, dyers, and embroiderers—with farmers and herders, forming a cohesive value chain that operates in harmony with the local environment. By strengthening the local wool value chain, artisans gain autonomy over raw materials, enabling ecologically sound and sustainable craft production.

This practice not only ensures the survival of traditional weaving and textile crafts but also safeguards cultural heritage and promotes ecological sustainability. At the heart of this system lies a network of interdependence, connecting communities, economies, and nature, and fostering resilience on both cultural and environmental fronts.

CONCLUSION

Pattu textiles exemplify the intricate connection between craft, community, and ecology, offering a model of prosperity that is deeply rooted in sustainability. Their production reflects a harmonious balance between human ingenuity and the natural environment, showcasing the value of Indigenous and Local Ecological Knowledge (ILEK) in fostering resilience.

By integrating traditional skills such as hand-spinning, weaving, and embroidery with locally sourced wool, Pattu-making sustains livelihoods, preserves cultural heritage, and supports ecological stewardship.

This craft embodies more than just functionality; it weaves together intergenerational knowledge, community collaboration, and ecological adaptability. Pastoralist and farming communities, through their daily engagement with livestock and the environment, demonstrate how co-production and embodied practices create a sustainable and prosperous way of life. These textiles serve not only as functional artifacts but as living narratives that reflect cultural identity and environmental harmony.

In an era of rapid industrialization and environmental challenges, Pattu textiles provide critical insights into sustainable fashion and community resilience. They remind us of the importance of localized, eco-friendly practices that align with cultural and environmental needs. Drawing on Arturo Escobar's (2018) concept of the pluriverse—a world where many worlds coexist—Pattu exemplifies how Indigenous and place-based knowledge systems challenge dominant, homogenizing models of progress and sustainability. These textiles, and the communities that produce them, point to alternative ways of knowing, making, and living that are rooted in relationality, care, and diversity.

By valuing and integrating these traditional practices, we can chart a path toward a future that embraces both prosperity and sustainability—one that honors cultural difference and ecological stewardship as central to a just and plural world.

NOTES

desi oon is local/indigenous wool

Pattu is a handspun, handwoven, unstitched textile found in both the Thar Desert in Rajasthan and the Himalayas in Himachal Pradesh, India.

In Rajasthan, India, the word "*Khaddi*" is commonly used in the local language to refer to a loom, particularly a handoperated loom used for weaving.

Pit Treadle Looms are among the earliest known treadle looms used in India, with origins dating back over four thousand years. Remarkably, these looms remain largely unchanged in their original design. Known for their versatility, pit treadle looms have enabled Indian weavers to craft a wide range of textiles, from the finest cottons and silks to coarse, durable woolens, demonstrating their adaptability across diverse materials and weaving traditions (Munshi, et al.,1992).

"Because so little was needed in the way of a loom frame, the pit loom is ideally suited for an environment, that offered little wood for construction." (From the Book Of Looms by Eric Broudy)

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