

The Afterlife of Discarded Woolens: Who is Recycling my Clothes?

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Abstract

Purpose: This photo shoot aims to document and understand the process, present scenario, facilities and workers condition of wool recycling units in Panipat, a small town in northern part of India. The city emerged as the recycling hub when the owners of Panipat mills bought second-hand machines from Prato, Italy and started recycling wool and producing shoddy yarn. Panipat is acknowledged as the “cast off capital” and is a part of recycling \$182 million value of worn clothes imported to India annually.

Methodology: In total, 5 wool recycling units were visited for studying the processes and taking photographs. 20 unstructured interviews of workers, 5 unstructured interviews of factory owners, factory managers/ labor contractors each were conducted.

Findings: The findings were categorized into three subheads: The processes, Worker condition and the present scenario. The process of recycling has been same since the inception. With the industry mainly driven by the unorganized sector, there is a lack of investment from the owners towards machinery up-gradation and worker well-being. The economic and social aspect of sustainability is lacking in the whole system. Poor working conditions, lowest worker wages and workers prone to respiratory disorders is the other face of the industry that is doing good to the planet by recycling waste.

The industry is on the decline due to competition from the lightweight polyester blanket, almost of the same price, softer in hand feel and of better aesthetics. Large amounts of clothing lie without processing due to the slump in demand. The price of imports per kg has fallen by almost 3 times as compared to early 1990's when it was approximately 50 Rs/kg to now at 16 Rs/kg now. The lightweight polyester substitute, excess supply of second-hand clothing and fall in demand of its recycled products poses many questions about the future of recycling fashion. This is a case where substitutes are cannibalizing sustainability efforts.

Implications: The photos from this study have a direct implication on creating awareness of the social impact of overconsumption and over disposal. We need to think beyond eco-friendly disposal. At the time when we are concerned about “who made my clothes”, it is also the phase when we ask “Who is recycling my clothes” and what substitutes hamper recycling too.

Keywords: Wool Recycling, Fashion Recycling, Labor condition, Panipat Recycling Industry

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