

Leeds University Business School - Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode number 64: Cotton hidden voices: stories from the makers of your clothes

Speakers: Dr Mark Sumner, Dr Divya Singhal and Dr Bethan Bide

[00:00:00] **Mark:** Hello and welcome to the latest episode of the Research and Innovation Podcast. My name's Dr Mark Sumner, and today we're gonna be talking about "Cotton hidden voices: stories from the makers of your clothes" - a project that was funded by AHRC, and a project that we started working on back in August 2021.

And today I'm really pleased to be joined by two of the project colleagues. and they are Divya.

[00:00:28] **Divya:** Hello, Namaste. My name is Divya Singhal. I'm a professor at the Goa Institute of Management, India.

[00:00:33] **Mark:** And we're also joined by Bethan.

[00:00:36] **Bethan:** Hello, I'm Bethan Bide, and I'm a lecturer in the School of Design at the University of Leeds.

[00:00:41] **Mark:** And it's great to have both of you on today's call. It feels like we've been, it's been a long time since we last spoke about the project with everything that's been going on recently, but it's really nice to take this opportunity just to, to step back and have a little think about this project that we started back in, or we started the application in August 2021.

And it's really nice just to be able to think about where the project has come from and, Divya, I know you've been involved, we've been working together for, for many, many years. I just wanted to, it would be really nice just to have a bit of a, a bit of a very quick potted history of where this project came from and how we ended up doing this project.

[00:01:16] **Divya:** Yeah. So thank you, Mark. This the whole, you know, the Textile Supply Chain project started in 2017 when we first got our British Academy Grant to understand the Modern Slavery Act and this impact on the textile supply chain. So we interviewed the brands operating in the UK. We interviewed businesses along the Indian value chain, cotton farms.

And after that, the second project, was again, funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council, AHRC. And that was around, you know, in 2020 when the Covid was on peak to understand the impact of Covid 19 on the textile supply chain. And then this is the third project, which is a follow-on project, as you mentioned, Cotton Hidden Voices, which started in August 2021.

And we are still like, we have made a lot of progress, and some things are still going on. So this is a short history of the project.

[00:02:11] **Mark:** Thanks Divya. 2017 seems like a really long time ago. A lot of things have happened since then. Divya, we've been working together along with, other colleagues within the business, Matt and Hinrich, who we'll introduce on other podcasts. But Bethan, I can't quite work out whether you were lucky or whether you were unlucky to get drawn into this.

But, in terms of where this fits into your research, how, how have you got involved in this project?

Bethan: I feel like that's a question you're just asking for your own sake there, Mark. How on earth, why are you here? I mean, I think I'm very lucky. We'll go with that. And I got brought into this because my interests overlap but are a little bit different to a lot of the other people who've been working on the project before.

[00:02:50] **Bethan:** So I am really interested in the kind of history of the way people have used and bought and made clothes and textiles. So it might seem a bit odd that I got brought in to working on a project that's very much about the contemporary supply chain, but as part of my research, I have for a long time been really interested in how we kind of communicate the complexity of fashion and textiles to people and about how perhaps, we can work with kind of heritage organizations, with museums, with educational groups to try and talk to people about those things.

And this project actually fits into a lot of the things that I'm really interested in, which is things about, about how clothes get made, about how textiles get made, but also about the people who we don't hear about.

So often for me when I'm thinking about the history of textiles, it's very hard for us to kind of go back and recover the voices of the people who've made your clothes in the past, because actually those weren't really recorded. So the opportunity to be involved in kind of capturing those voices and then helping share them and sort of start a conversation was really exciting.

So I've done quite a lot of work with museums, as I said, other heritage organizations like that before. So I kind of came in to help create some of those links between some of our museum and heritage partners that we're working with on this project.

[00:04:12] **Mark:** And this, this project's been really interesting from my perspective. I've stepped out of my comfort zone, and started working with all sorts of different organizations and partners. Like, as you say, museums and, and galleries and, other educators. And also, scarily, talking to members of the public about, you know, some of the stuff that we've found.

But it's been a really interesting project from that point of view in terms of partners and in terms of stakeholders. And I know, Divya, in terms of the sort of connections that you've had in India, and the, the people that you've been talking to develop new partnerships, but also very much been involved in that process of talking to the workers, and exploring what the workers have, have wanted to talk about.

[00:04:52] **Divya:** Yeah. So, so, you know, first of all, it was for, personally, for me, also was a learning experience, learning journey. As we always say that, how the clothes are made. So I was not aware. So one is I, you know, got information about how our clothes are made, and also to hear the workers' voices.

We always tend to think that, you know, it's, it's very easy. So cotton-making cotton or the shirt-making is an easy process. But when, when I went and interviewed workers who were working, maybe the cotton farmers, the ginners the spinners, first of all, it was fantastic to know that each of these processes required a technical expertise. If you do not have a knowledge, you can't do that.

For example, dying is highly technical. How much, you know, colour you need, to mixing to achieve to the desired colour? And how much time to process everything. Second, you know, because we interviewed approximately 30, 35 workers in India and across the all six tiers, arranging from the garment manufacturing to the cotton farmers, we realized that there are multiple things.

One, whether you are at the cotton farming level or the garment manufacturing level. The people were content, people were happy about their own, you know, work, which they were doing. Also interesting to know people who are working in the supply chain have no clear idea how the clothes are made.

[00:06:23] **Divya:** So that was also very interesting. You know, there was one very interesting question that "how many hands have touched before you bought a t-shirt or a shirt?" And we got the answers ranging from five hands to 500 hands. So, which means people who are working in the textile supply chain, they had no information about that.

And of course there were other questions about workers. What they enjoy, you know, their experience or working in the textile, supply chain, their perception about the UK consumers, their perception about the fashion. So a lot of interesting things came out, during these discussions. Some of the things, you know, I understood because of my basic understanding of common language. Some interviews were conducted in Hindi, so it was very interesting to note the journey, their experiences.

[00:07:12] **Mark:** And, and it's really interesting. I've worked in the industry for too many years, and technically I know how we get a cotton seed all the way through the process to end up with a garment at the end. But what was really interesting is all of these stories that you talked about, Divya, and all of these, experiences that, that the workers were talking about, and I was really struck as well about that the passion that the workers had and the knowledge.

And, and as you say, for many of them, you know, they wanted to work in the industry. So it's really interesting. And, and in many ways those, those interviews you did really resonated with, and, and Bethan, you came up with this phrase, this phrase of "bridging the gap" between the workers and consumers.

And in many ways that was, that was one of the really important parts of the project, I suppose, Bethan, wasn't it, in terms of, you know, what the project was all about is, is bridging that gap.

[00:08:08] **Bethan:** Yeah and I think making that kind of vast, complex thing that is the fashion and textile supply chain, understandable at a human level to people. So, you know, we know from talking to people that lots of people would love to, kind of, consume fashion in a way that is more sustainable, more ethical, but people are just absolutely confused about where to start there, and I don't, that's, that's not to pass blame onto anyone for being confused about that.

I think as we have highlighted, there's a reason why we're all confused and it's because it's a very confusing and complex thing. And I think, again, this project really highlighted to me how many perhaps preconceptions I had before going in that actually kind of hearing from people helped, break down.

So, you know, for me, one of my big preconceptions was, I sort of assumed that most people who were working on, as machinists in factory making up clothes would be women. And actually it's again, really interesting to kind of see that the gender balance wasn't at all what I, what I imagined.

But having those kind of moments, where you have perhaps your preconceptions about who people are, about how they feel about their jobs challenged is a really helpful way to step back and go, okay, maybe I need to reevaluate what I think this supply chain is and what I think my role in it as a consumer is.

And we've been working with, we've done sort of a couple of events where we've gone out and shared this story with public and, Mark I know has spent several Saturdays next to me, talking to people about this. And I think we have been, I guess, really kind of blown away by how interested people are in the, in those human stories.

And particularly we've been working with a group of young people, with Leeds museums and gallery. And, I think they have really been able to kind of catch onto the fact that these people are, complex people just like them. They have kind of hopes and desires and ambitions just like them, and that actually the clothes that they wear kind of connect them to these people who are very far away doing a very different thing to them.

[00:10:10] **Bethan:** And I think that's been a real, a really exciting part of the project for me, as, as Mark said, it's, it's about bridging the gap, but it's about the fact that actually what we

wear does kind of connect us to lots, lots of people that we'll probably never meet. And this is a kind of rare opportunity for people to sort of catch a glimpse of some of those people.

[00:10:28] **Divya:** Yeah, I, I think, you know, so we also did one event in Goa, with Museum of Goa. And as part of this event, the whole idea was that bridging the gap, what Bethan just talked about. So what we did, we presented a photo exhibition where we interviewed the workers in the southern part of India.

So, you know, approximately 30 photographs were displayed and those photographs were from the farms to the factories. And we gave the whole event from farm to factory. It was a hands-on experiential. So one is the photo exhibition. Second, there was a tactile element also. So we made available the cotton fibres, yarn, and other things from the production cycle. and there was a documentary which was shown. Later on there was a discussion. And in the discussion we realized the people, approximately 80 people who attended, they, you know, majority of them had no idea how their clothes are made. And one thing which I observed is the gratitude after the entire three, four hours of interaction.

That gratitude, they had. and they wanted to give their message to the cotton farmers, to the ginners. and they wrote, you know, I never, imagined that this, the process and I never imagined that so many people are involved. So I think, bridging the gap and then also that, that kind of empathy or gratitude, maybe a bit of responsible consumption, bit. I'm not sure though, but yeah.

[00:11:55] **Mark:** And, and I reflect on the, yeah, just thinking about the original application that we did, to get the, the funding in the first place. One of the things that we talked about there, was the United Nations Sustainable Development goals, and in particular the focus on responsible consumption and responsible production.

And in my very sort of linear scientific brain, I was thinking, well, we'll do the project and we come up with a set of answers, to what responsible consumption, and responsible production looks like. But I don't think we have come up with any answers. And, and in many ways, again, you know, through the, the project, I've been challenged on this idea that we have to come up with answers and actually what we've done in many ways, I think, you know, Bethan, you know, you talked about that public engagement, those events that we've done, it's really about being, it's about creating that debate, isn't it? And about people sort of thinking about their own solutions to these things.

[00:12:47] **Bethan:** Yeah. And I think it's about asking the question of "what does the responsible and sustainable future of fashion textiles look like?" Because, one of the things that's been so great about this project is by telling people stories, by putting faces, behind your clothes, we have made people, I think, think a little bit about the fact that a lot of people are involved in their journey.

You know, when they go to the shop and they buy a t-shirt, actually that t-shirt tells a huge number of stories and it's connected to a lot of other people's lives. So when they think

about what it means to be ethical in their consumption, actually they are asking that question on behalf of all of these other people as well.

So I think that, one of the things that's really come out is people going, well actually, do we need to have a bigger kind of conversation about this? Do we need to have a bigger dialogue about this? Do we need to be talking to the people who are involved in making our clothes in order to come up with an answer?

You know, perhaps it's not something that we can do kind of by ourselves alone in the UK. Actually, perhaps this has got to be a much more international discussion, because supply chains are international.

[00:13:59] **Mark:** Absolutely. And, and I guess, Divya, in terms of those conversations you had directly with the workers. often through translators, you know, lots of different local languages going on. There was a very strong impression from the workers themselves that they really engage in fashion as well.

They really liked the idea of buying clothes, and looking good and feeling good, you know, through that purchase. But, they were also very interested in the fact that, people continue to buy new clothes because that's where their livelihood comes from. So you have that challenging dynamic that we have, you know, that international dynamic of in the Western world or developed nations like the UK, it's, "let's not buy more clothes".

But in terms of, the people that you're talking to, you know that the, the buying of clothes is, is the lifeblood for them in terms of their, income.

[00:14:51] **Divya:** True, true that because they are engaged in that, if the garment is sold, that's how their, their livelihood. So their entire livelihood depends on how much sale is happening. So I think there, there's always this contradiction about the slow fashion versus the fast fashion, and I don't think we will have a very clear cut answers.

But, what workers mentioned about that there is a stark difference about the UK consumers, I'm going to say their perception about the UK consumers, they think that they never wear a, a cloth more than once or twice. Because they have money. And whereas when we ask them about their own purchasing pattern of the clothes, so of course in India, you know that there are a lot of festivals and each of the festival requires, in a sense to wear new clothes.

So, you know, they buy on festival occasions as well as other occasions like birthdays and other things, but they said, "Here we may be buying maybe 10 or 12 new clothes in a year, but in the Western world, they buy maybe every third or fourth day". So this, this was interesting, to note, and, and they were happy about that because they were saying that our clothes are sent there.

So if they will not buy, then how we will earn. So, yes, I agree that there is always this kind of challenge.

[00:16:12] **Mark:** Yeah, so, so we do have that, that sort of dilemma, and I think that's part of the, ultimately the aim of the project - thinking about when we put that application in, back in August of 2021, and where we are now when we, and we still, the project is still ongoing. Where we are now is really about sort of creating more of those questions, to get people to explore where their clothes are from and, and the connections that those clothes have with other people's lives.

But just in terms of, thinking about where we've got to so far, for you, in terms of what's the most surprising thing that you think you might have learned from this project? What's the thing that's really stood out that you just thought, well, !wow, I just hadn't really thought about that. It hadn't really crossed my mind.! In terms of just thinking about what we've done over the past two years.

[00:17:27] **Bethan:** I think for me it has been the really kind of stark difference between, the kind of, I guess the, the technological side of the production process and the very old school, traditional ways that some things are done. So, you know, when I have, seen the recordings, that Divya and her team made, you know, I, I'm watching people doing ginning and, you know, sitting by hand large groups of people doing this kind of very laborious task in a way that it could have been done a hundred, 150 years ago.

And then I am seeing footage of the dye house, which is enormously complex and technical and mechanical. And I think it's, it's really interesting to think about, I suppose for me, how these processes are connected to a long history of textile making, both in the UK and in India, but also how they kind of sit on the cusp of kind of mechanical change as well.

So they've all these kind of possibilities about how they might be different in the future. So it feels to me, I suppose I was hoping when I came into this project that, my background in history might be useful, but it feels to me like, it surprised me how much the textile industry sits on the cusp between the past and, and the future.

And both of them are happening all at once and it's really exciting, but kind of incredible at the same time.

[00:18:20] **Divya:** So, so for me, the exciting part was witnessing those processes because I went myself, so I witnessed those in, in knitting. Knitting was fantastic because there were huge machines and they put, you put the yarn and it comes out like, like the cloth comes out. So watching this, hand grading happening in the ginning factory, everything was new learning for me.

So I will say that I am really lucky to be part of this project because I got to learn so many things about the cloth making.

[00:18:51] **Bethan:** I think it's, it's interesting, isn't it? The kind of more you learn about how much goes into it and how much expertise goes into it, the more it does actually. I said, even for me, make me think differently about the clothes that I have, it does make me sort of stop and take them for granted less than I might otherwise have done.

So I think it's that bit of going, you know, even if we don't have answers about the right way to do stuff, I think for me it has really made me stop and think about how much goes into them, how many skills, how much expertise, and that that is something that's worth reflecting on.

[00:19:27] **Mark:** And I think from, from my perspective, the thing that's really surprised me is, is how interested people are in their clothes. When you get a chance to actually have a, you know, a conversation that isn't about, is it the latest colour or the latest style, it's just this idea of having a conversation with, with people about their clothes and, why they buy them.

Why do they keep this one particular garment for years, but another garment, they wear a couple of times and they're not interested in wearing again. And it is really interesting when we, when we start, share the stories from, from the workers, that sort of connection that, that people are starting to build, which I guess, is one of the key aims of, the project.

So, we, we could carry on talking about this for hours. I, I know we can because we, we have done that in the past. but I'm very aware of the fact that we've got to finish, for today. But this is, obviously the first of many podcasts that we're gonna be doing as part of this project.

So, Bethan and Divya, thank you very much for your time and, and also thank you very much for all the input to the, to the project and, look forward to speaking to you again.

[00:20:27] **Bethan:** Thanks Mark. Thanks Divya.

[00:20:29] **Mark:** So if you want to learn more about the project, there's a link in the show notes to the project website. And the project website will have lots of materials and videos and activities, to have a look at. Thank you very much for listening to today's podcast and we look forward to speaking to you soon. Bye.