

Design by Proxy

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Abstract

The pressure to be heard and to be a part of a larger conversation is so overwhelming today that some might even call it a necessity. This need to be heard exists in all facets of life, including design, and it is so powerful that it can compel a person to shift their original narrative to one that aligns with the larger, *recognizable* culture in order to reach a *listening* audience. Often, this narrative shift—from one what one *wants* to say, to what one *needs* to say **just to be heard**—can overshadow genuine curiosity, deep self-exploration, and authenticity.

In this essay, I examine this pressure to be heard, and how the psychological implications of external narratives potentially limit a designer's ability to explore in depth. The process of examining language has led me to examine various ways in which *other-ing* (cultural, class, professional, social) – as revealed through language—results in alienation of craftspeople and craft processes.

For example, I explore how the language used to identify Indian textiles and clothing—including terms like ethnic, preservation and sustainable clothing—creates barriers for designers to take ownership of craft. When designers from an elite, urban background talk about the processes of hand-crafted textiles as the selling point of their label, with a nod to the artisans who made them, they manage to gain the attention of a *listening* audience; ones with an ear out for *sustainability*. However, in many cases, the designers are proxying the voice of craftspeople without going deep into the materials and processes themselves. This thinking is heavily influenced by the notion that design and production are two separate fields. Applying this to the craft sector reduces makers to skilled labour, and leaves little scope for innovation beyond contemporary styling.

By designers, I refer to those Indian designers who have labels, many of whom have formally studied fashion or textile design; by craftspeople, I refer to Indian makers who come from a traditional craft community.

I also discuss how designers can immerse themselves in “play” —a state of exploration free of mainstream narratives. I argue that while functioning sans narratives leaves the designer exposed to the fear of failure, the alternative— a crowded market where narratives, surface aesthetics and marketing budgets allow one brand to be heard louder than others—is more grim. Perhaps what can make this journey less daunting, is if designers co-create with craftspeople and engage with the material and processes. In this instance, the risk of failure is worth it when one stands to gain the possibility of ownership, innovation and good design.
