

# COTTON'S HIDDEN VOICES

STORIES FROM THE MAKERS  
OF YOUR CLOTHES









## PREFACE

**Cotton's Hidden Stories** is a University of Leeds and Goa Institute of Management project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/W006936/1).

The project explores the complexity of sustainability and fashion from the perspective of the workers who make the clothes we wear. These clothes create intimate connections between consumers and the 400 million workers in the fashion industry's global supply chains. But these connections are hidden from view because the supply chains are so complex and opaque. As a result, discussions about sustainable fashion often fail to explore and be inclusive of the workers' perspectives; workers who grow the cotton, spin the yarns, make and dye fabrics, and sew our clothes. This project aims to illuminate these connections and to cross the geographical and cultural divide between textile workers in India and UK consumers, to facilitate debates and discussions about what sustainable fashion means for UK consumers and for workers in the supply chain. Through collaboration with workers in India, the project has created visual, audio, written and digital content that brings their hidden voices to the sustainability debate. These human stories will help consumers, educators, designers and policy makers to broaden their understanding of sustainability and to improve their knowledge and awareness of the global fashion industry.

The project has been developed to reflect the importance of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, particularly:



This project builds on research outputs from the AHRC funded project 'Impact of Covid-19 on management to eradicate modern slavery from global supply chains'.







In the heart of the cotton industry, over a hundred pairs of hands tirelessly toil before our garments finally reach us. They wake with the sun, working long hours under scorching skies, tending to cotton fields with unwavering dedication. These hands pass the baton to workers in processing facilities,



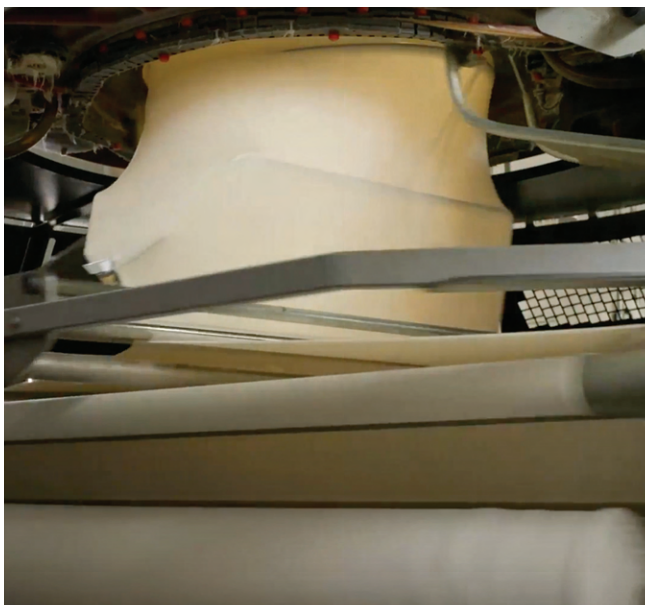
where intricate machinery transforms the cotton into luxurious textiles. Each step, executed with precision and skill, weaves together the threads of their collective effort. These hands belong to individuals with families, hopes, and ambitions that extend far

beyond the cotton fields. Their journey doesn't end there. Skilled workers, with nimble fingers and keen eyes, breathe life into the fabric, dyeing and stitching

each garment with love and care. They pour their hearts into every stitch, knowing that the work of their labour will grace our bodies.

There is an immense web of humanity behind each garment; the unwavering dedication and countless hours invested by these hands. They deserve recognition, appreciation, and fair treatment. Embrace the empathy that comes with understanding the lives behind the craft. And may this emotional connection inspire a world where every hand is respected and uplifted on their journey from cotton bud to us.







# FROM COTTON BUD TO A GARMENT



“The making of a cotton garment starts with cotton farming, then it goes to ginning where the cotton seeds and dust is removed from it, then it goes to spinning where it is cleaned, carded, combed and then turned into fine but strong yarns. The spun cotton then goes to knitting or weaving. Where the yarn is turned into a fabric. Garments are made from cotton which is either knitted or woven. After that, it's sent to dyeing followed by printing or embroidery depending on the clients' requirement and finally to a garment manufacturing unit where the fabric will be cut, stitched, checked and packed. The cotton thus travels through maybe seven to eight steps before it becomes the final garment.”

**DR. G. SUGANYA,**

Ex-Owner, Avie

Women's Apparel  
Manufacturing Brand









# THE FIRST HAND



“I've been planting cotton for about 30 years. I have a family of 4 and also have 2 cows. In March, April, the preparation process for cotton farming starts with weeding the field which is done for about ten days. It takes around six days for the seeds to germinate. After three to four months, we can see the growth of the plant into a flower. From a flower, it will change the cotton. By the time the cotton is harvested, it takes about a total of 100 people to complete the process. Farming in this forest gives me happiness. I couldn't ask to be more happy.

**PALANISAMY**

Cotton Farmer













“

“Cost of labour to work in cotton fields is high so that’s why we decided to do the process within our family, within a community or a known circle.”









# GINNING

The first mechanical process involved in the processing of cotton; in which the cotton lint is separated from the seed and dust particles. The pure form of cotton is then pressed into bales using machines.





“

“ I wanted to study well. But I was not able to study well, I was studying moderately only. So, I came for work here. Within this mill wherever I work and whatever work I do that gives me happiness.”

**MAGESHWARI**  
In-charge of Ginning





# UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS

Contamination cleaning is done by the naked eye via hand grading by labour who have approximately 10-30 years of experience. The cleaned cotton is then compressed via the process of pressing into a bale. After which it is cleaned again before it is ready for export. These standards of ginning are accepted internationally across Japan, Indonesia, America etc.







Female employees are encouraged, especially old ladies, as they are assigned to do hand grading process which requires sitting and working. More number of aged women are employed in our premises because of which our company additionally functions as an old age home also"

**MS. PREMA APPUSAMY**

Managing Director



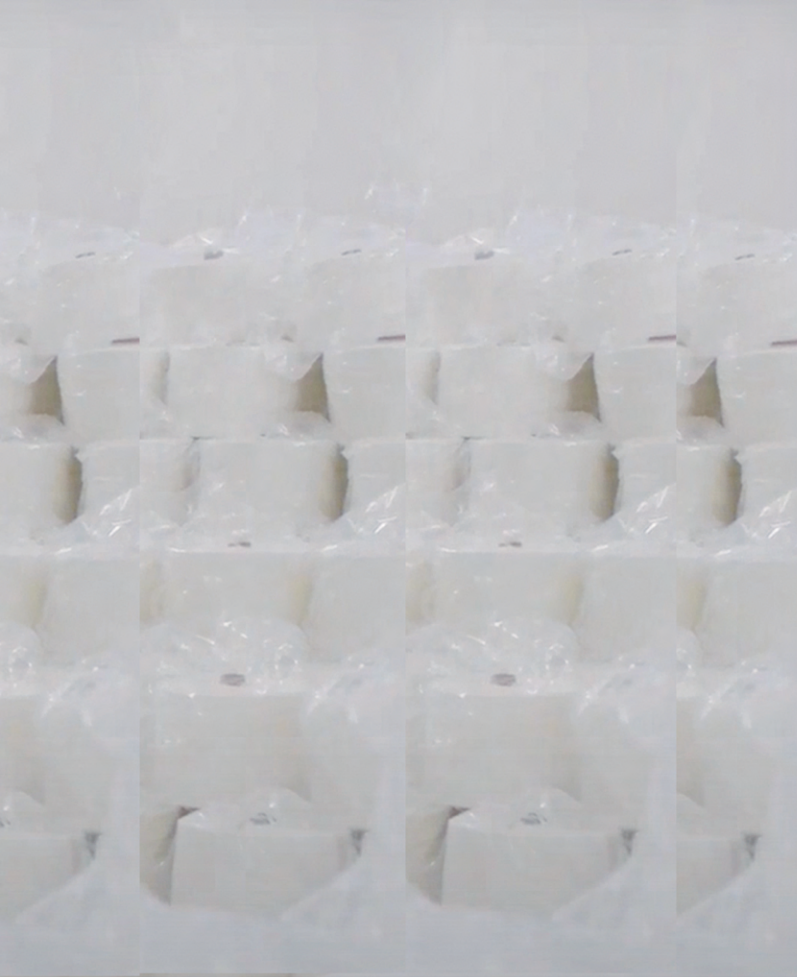


# SPINNING

In spinning different machines and processes are used to convert the cotton fibre into yarns which are used in the next stage of textile making.







## UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS

Raw cotton is taken to a blow room to remove dust, followed by carding to straighten the fibres, which then go into drawing to make the roving, which is spun to make the yarn. The spun yarns are wound on to big cones ready for the next stage.







“



**MS. M.KALAVATH**  
Spinning Preparatory Fitter

"My job makes me most happy, maybe because I knew nothing when I came here 17-18 years ago"



**MS. MAHALAKSHMI**  
Quality control

"When I find something wrong, it is immediately corrected and that makes me happy and makes me want to do a better job"



**MS. SUDHA**  
Training Teacher

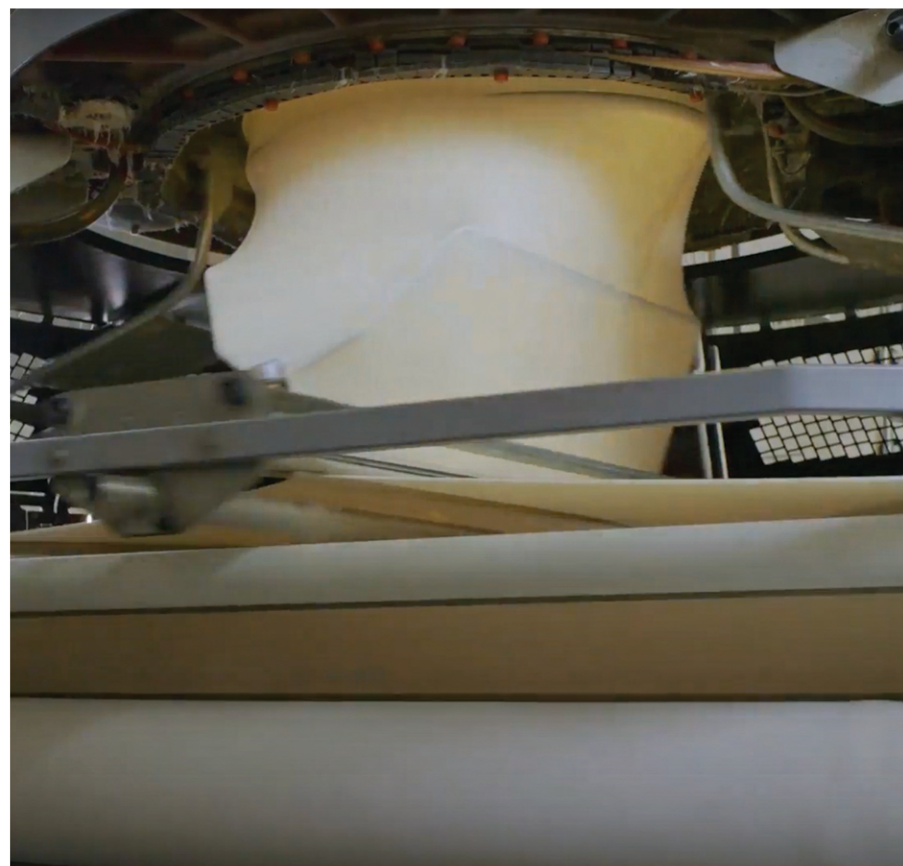
"When I see people whom I trained, doing a better job than me; that makes me feel very happy"





# KNITTING

Raw cotton is spun and twisted to make the yarn. This process locks the fibres together and gives the yarn strength. The next process is knitting which locks these yarn together to make the fabric







# UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS

Knitting is a method of production of textile fabrics by interlacing yarn loops with loops of the same or other yarns. The yarn passes through a tensioning mechanism and down through the knit carriage, which feeds the yarn to the needles as they knit. Domestic knitting machines use the weft knitting method which produces a fabric similar to hand knitting. Yarn packages are placed in the creel, feeding the yarn, in the knitting machine. The machine is set up for the right design & fabric weight. After the knitting process is done, the roll of fabric is withdrawn and weighted. Accordingly, the fabric roll marking is done. Then it is sent for inspection and numbering. Finally, dispatching is done.





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“My native is Tirupur only. For us textiles field is our world. ...From yarn sourcing till the finishing stage, I am aware of all the process involved”

**TAMIL SELVAN**

In-charge

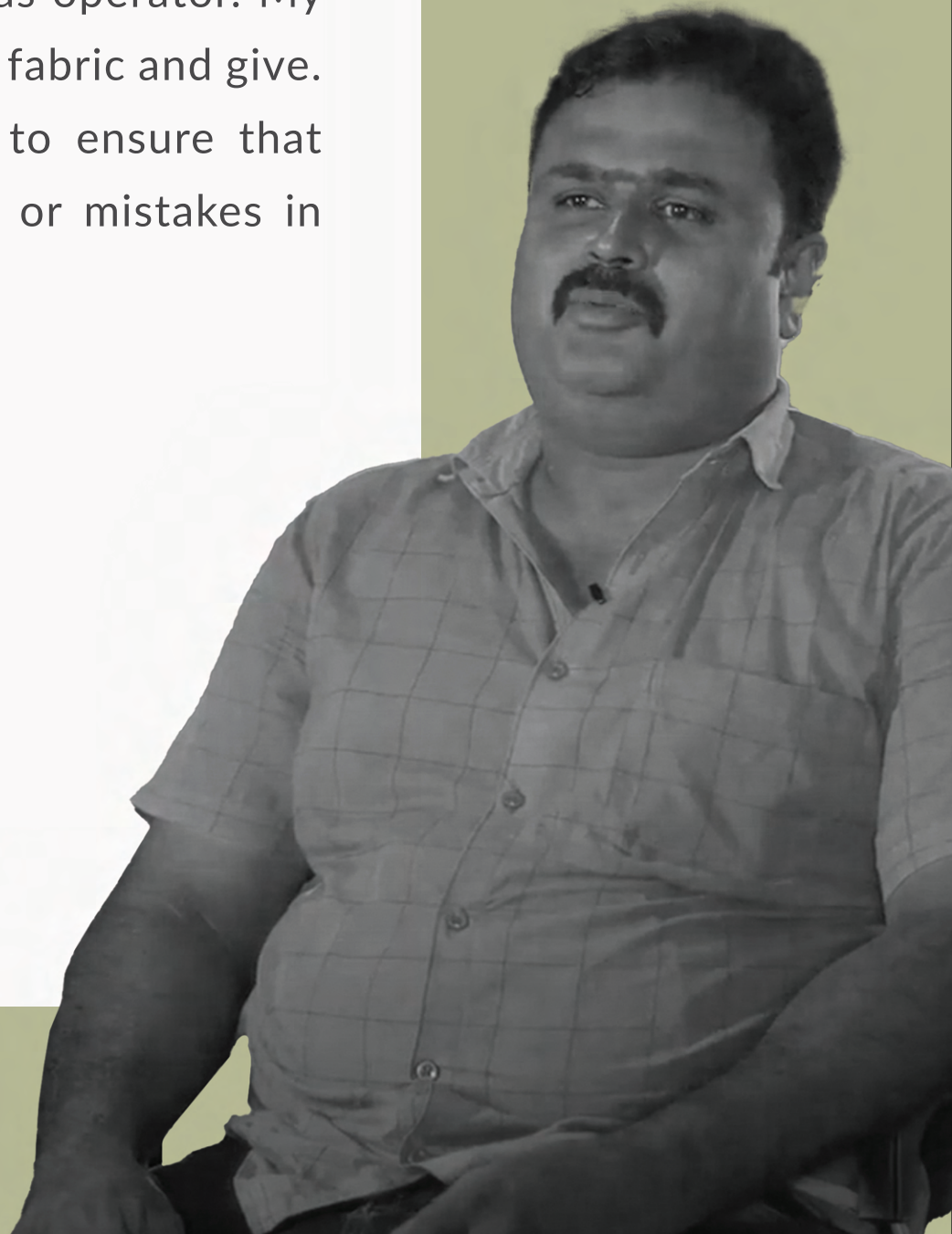


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“Totally it’s been 10 years since I had started working in this field. First, I joined as a helper, then got promoted as operator. My work is to knit the yarn into fabric and give. Other than that, we have to ensure that there is no quality defects or mistakes in the knitted fabric”

## **PRAKASH**

Fabric in-charge foreman



















“We all stay together, natives of Odisha and Bengal.”



“We start our duty at 8:00 am and finish at 7:30pm with a lunch and rest break in between.”



“

## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A WORKER



“I have a mother, father and brother back home in my village. I've come away to work and support them. “



“The company provides us everything we need including gas, electricity, food and water.”





“We are provided with a canteen.  
We can choose to eat there or  
our own food.”



“I like everything about my job  
because it benefits us and we are  
able to support our families.”



“I go back to my village once a  
year and the rest of the year I  
come back here to work. I like it.”



“I love to work here and give my  
best.”



# VOICES OF WOMEN IN COTTON



“Talking about women empowerment, as far as my city is concerned, ladies have the freedom to work. None of the ladies like to stay at home and all of them prefer to work. My father-in-law was against women being confined to household duties and believed firmly that they should get an opportunity to work. He encouraged me to learn about the business. I found it very interesting and really liked the line of work and had a deep passion for it. Yes, female workers are highly encouraged and given a chance in my company. They earn an income. So this also means that they don't have to depend on their son or anybody else. They become very independent. No matter how much work they have at home, they still prefer to come to the mill to work because that is how involved they are with the work here, and also because they love working”



**MS. PREMA APPUSAMY**

Managing Director  
Sri Santhalakshmi Mills Pvt Ltd





"It becomes easier to manage a family only if one goes to work, (In today's world) at least two people's salaries must take care of children and their needs."

## MS. MAHALAXMI

Quality Control



Women have a lot of curiosity and they express a lot of interest and are willing to learn. Be it their involvement or their boldness, their resilient nature, it is what is bringing them more opportunities and jobs that were earlier considered a man's job.

## MS. LOGANAYAKI

Cotton farmer



"Here, they don't differentiate between owners and workers. We work very freely and do our work happily."

## MS. AGATHUR SELVI

Supervisor,  
Sri Santhalashmi Mills



"Simply coming to work here by itself makes me very happy."

## MS. HAMSAVENI

Hand Grading Area,  
Sri Santhalashmi Mills



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"We work very hard, I'll say that everyone needs to think of us as well."

**NEERAJ KUMAR**  
Cutter



# Title: 'Cotton's Hidden Stories'

## CONTRIBUTORS

Edited by: **Dr. Divya Singhal & Dr. Mark Sumner**

Conceptualisation: **Dr. Divya Singhal**

Designed by: **Dranding Consulting**

Art direction and Storyboarding: **Katya Cordeiro**

DOP: **Krishna Devate**

Cinematographer: **Tanmoy Nath**

Graphic designer: **Purva Mule**

## PROJECT TEAM

**Dr. Bethan Bide**

**Dr. Divya Singhal**

**Dr. Hinrich Voss**

**Dr. Matthew Davis**

**Dr. Mark Sumner**

**Arts & Humanities Research Council**

**School of Design, University of Leeds**

**Goa Institute of Management**

**Special thanks to : Dr. Suganya G.**

**- Farmers, workers and other stakeholders who participated and shared their stories**

**Global Textile Process**

**Vaibhavlaxmi Textiles LLP**

**Espany Knitting Mill**

**Sarmangal Synthetics Private Limited**

**Sri Santhalakshmi Ginning Mills Pt Ltd**

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Published by Goa Institute of Management, Goa, India 2023.

**ISBN 978-81-964520-1-8**

Printed in India  
2023

PRESENTING  
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A COFFEE TABLE BOOK- A TREASURE  
TROVE OF CAPTIVATING INSIGHTS THAT  
ARE SURE TO IGNITE YOUR CURIOSITY.

EDITED BY  
DR. DIVYA SINGHAL & DR. MARK SUMNER

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