

# Life-Centred Design: Compassion in Action

Thinking, Learning, Doing: Plural Ways of Design

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# Abstract

**Compassion is fundamental to human and planetary survival**, continuity and flourishing. Advances in psychology and neuroscience have significantly increased our understanding of compassion as a core human trait with substrates of cooperation, caregiving, altruism, morality and inclusion. Neuroimaging studies investigating physiological characteristics and chemical activity of the brain reveal that neural-correlates of compassion-based thinking and behaviours are specific, traceable and distinct from lab-controlled cruelty trait expression. In simple terms, the brain is wired for compassion and cruelty. This evidence coupled with the growing global worldview of compassion as a core value, attitude and motive in designing for change, inclusion, security, accessibility and dignity, directly calls designers to incorporate compassionate thinking and behaviours in their design endeavours.

This in turn, inherently necessitates designers to reach beyond a human-centred approach to a life-centred design approach whereby consideration of the needs, wellbeing, pain-points and systemic place and belonging of all life forms and the planet's welfare and sustainability are all core considerations of the design process. In this exploratory paper, we treat compassion as the foundation for life-centred design approaches in which diverse perspectives, futures imagination and anticipatory betterment are central to the inclusive design paradigm. We draw on evidence-based neuroscience and psychology underpinning emotive, cognitive and behavioural correlates of compassion, and the human capacity for development and deliberate activation of compassion-based traits in the professional practice of designers. We conclude with a discussion on what this approach could mean and entail for designers, design thinking and design research.

# Keywords

**INCLUSIVE DESIGN**

**NEUROSCIENCE OF COMPASSION**

**LIFE CENTRED DESIGN**

**SPHERICAL ECOLOGY**

# What is Life-Centred Design?

Life-centred Design is a design philosophy and approach that goes beyond human needs and puts all life at the centre of our creations.

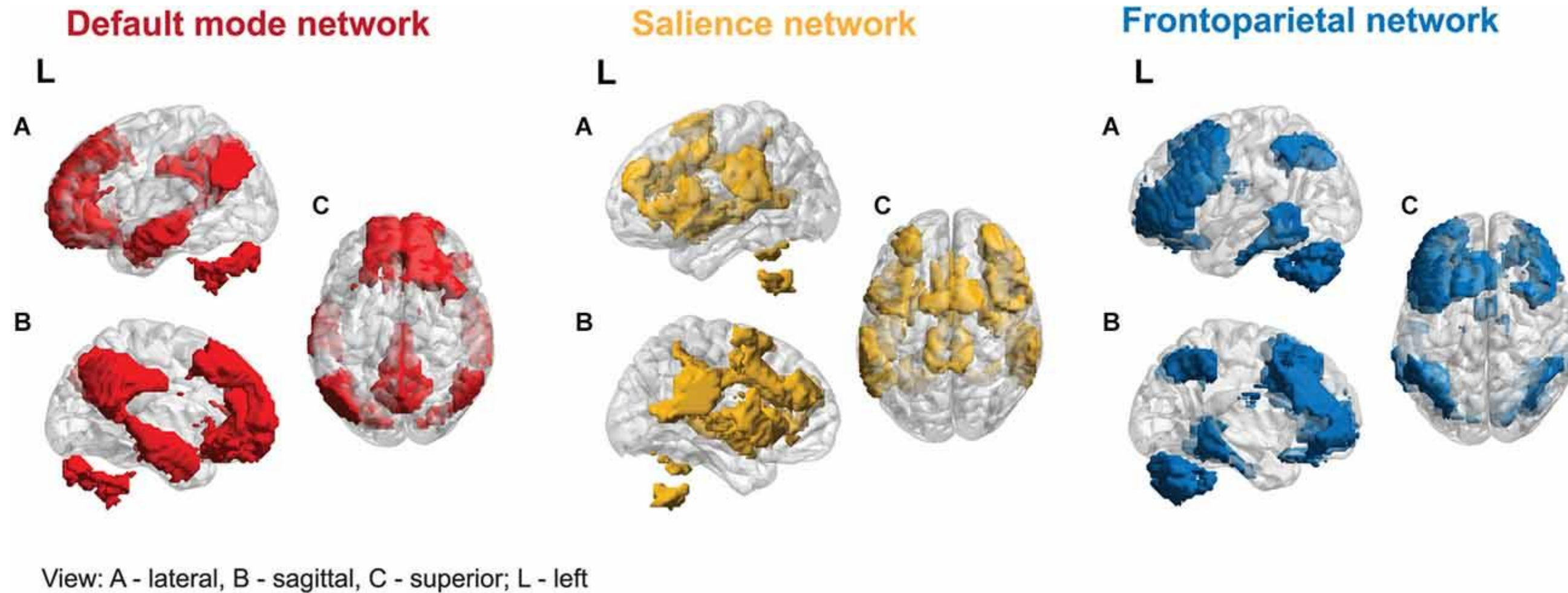
Life-centred Design advocates for biological ecosystems and non-user communities that have never had a voice in the design process. The long-term goal is to restore natural ecosystems by creating new relationships between nature and society.

**Jeroen Spoelstra (2022)**

# What is Compassion?

- An adaptive response to understanding and responding to the needs of others
- Pro-social behaviour that enhances survival, continuity and well-being
- Requires:
  - Sensitivity to the suffering of the other
  - Desire to alleviate the suffering

# The Brain that Cares for Others



# Holistic Compassion

Beyond users' sense of dignity, empowerment, inclusion, and security:

**"When we design for humanity, we cannot stop with people. We must consider the entire globe: all living things, the quality of the land, water, and air." – Don Norman**

# Wicked Problems and Compassion-led Design

Values-based

Wider impact on society and planet

Sustainability integrated in person-centred considerations

Systemic impact and future scenarios

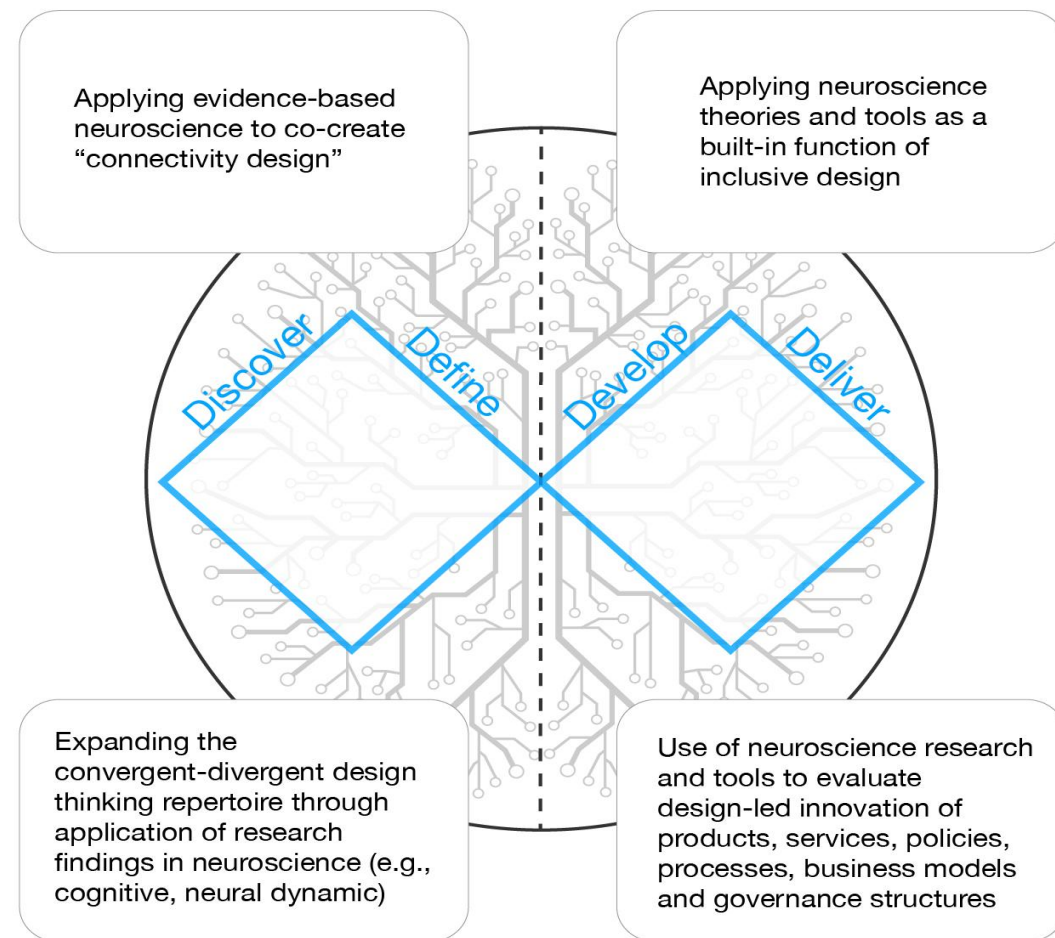
Understanding impact of waste generation

Waste as finite with potential for reuse to meet future human and planetary needs

Multi-scale innovations approach



# Design Meets Neuroscience: a design sans frontières proposition







# अनस्थिरता

impermanence    عدم استحكام

Life - centred Design: Compassion in Action | Flory and Agrawal, 2025

Photographer: Vladimir Melnik



# Interdependence - Interconnectedness

His holiness, The Dalai Lama says, “True **compassion** is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment founded on reason. Therefore, a truly compassionate attitude towards others does not change even if they behave negatively.” **Inter-dependence**, of course, is a fundamental law of nature. Not only higher forms of life but also many of the smallest insects are social beings who, without any religion, law or education, survive by mutual cooperation based on an innate recognition of their interconnectedness

***Self preservation to protection - a carnal need to save the rest for survival of self***



# निर्दयता

cruelty

ظلم



# Yamuna Grieves

the after life of a river and HER  
community as she nestles and  
crumbles through its **52** kilometre  
stretch of the National Capital Territory





# Veena - Lack Lustre

decolonising a traditional  
instrument - a classical  
conservatism, through its  
contemporary adaptation into  
Carnatic Jazz





# Kathakali

gender discord and inequality - an  
astute conditioning to discard  
grace, submissiveness and  
hostility and embrace aggression  
and heroism







वात्सल्य  
compassion پیار



# Indigo Beyond a Dye

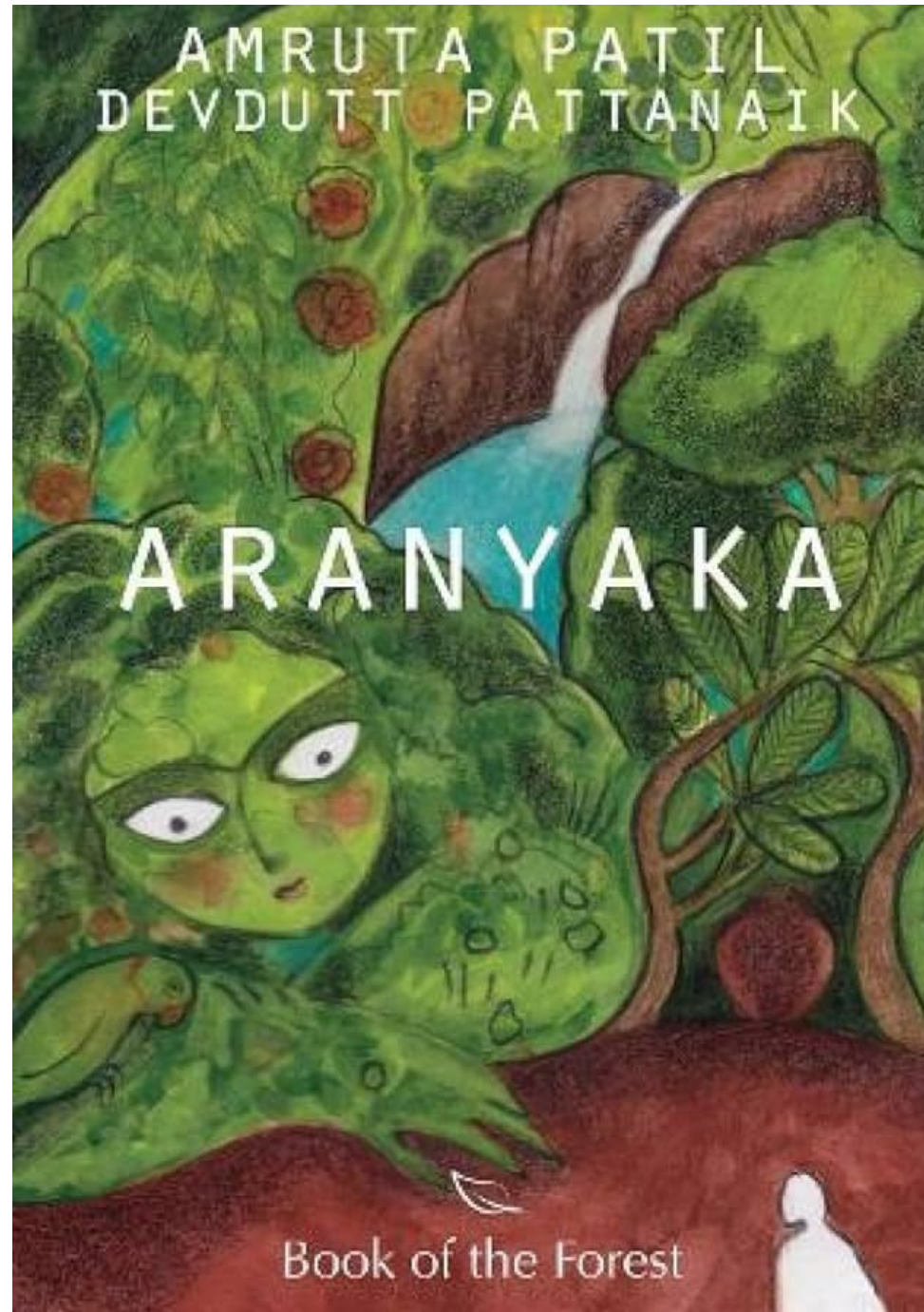
the community built as Ganga  
Maki at the foothills of Himalayas -  
Japanese textile designer Chiaki  
Maki preserves natural ways of  
rearing rare silk and cultivating  
chemical free indigo





# Not Human Narratives

Indian graphic novel Author and Illustrator - Amruta Patil and her tryst with untold India - addressing the untamed wonders of nature and its self preservation through a philosophical lens






# Pashmina – A Recital

**Taleem** - an heirloom, a secret passage of codes of weaving through generations by a medium of language, colour and symbols





A photograph of an elderly woman with grey hair, wearing a blue and white patterned sari with a yellow border, sitting on the grass. She is looking towards an elephant on the right, with her right hand raised in a gesture. The elephant is dark grey with a yellow collar and is reaching its trunk towards the woman. The background shows a savanna landscape with green grass and trees under a bright sky.

# other-centeredness universal altruism



# Spherical Ecology

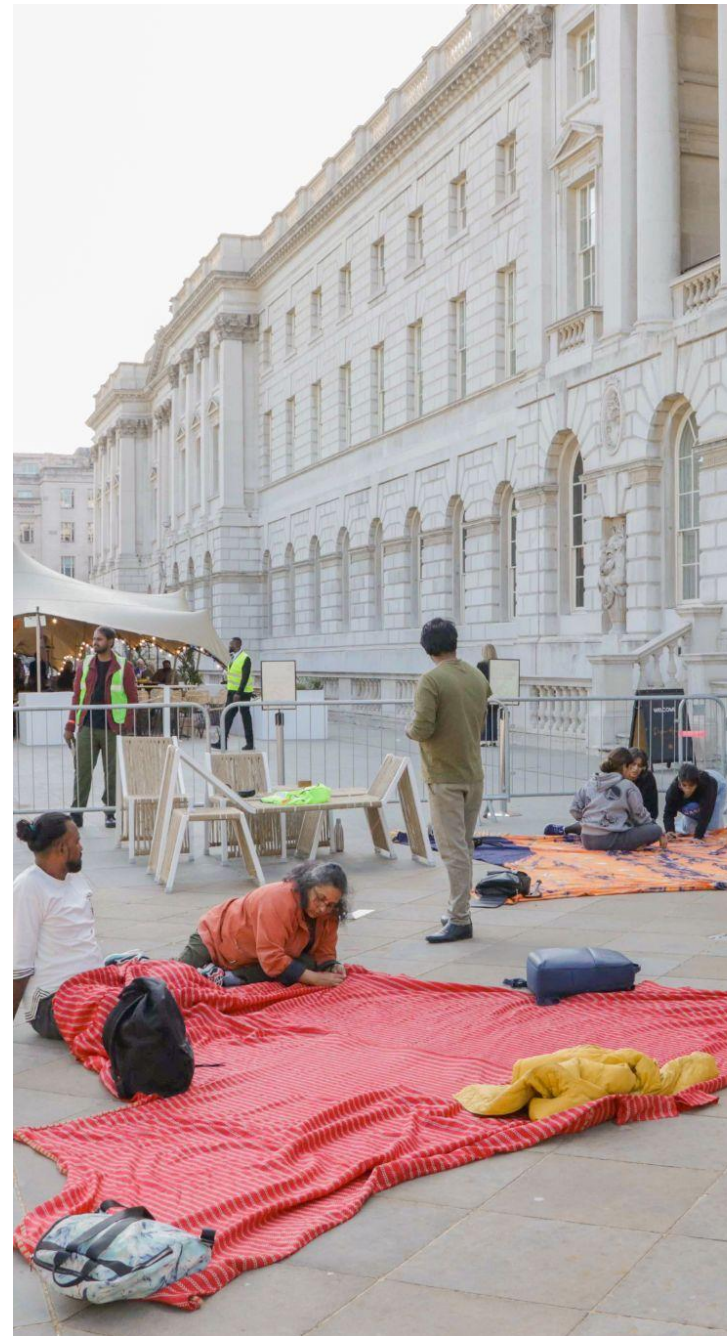
In a classic social model, The 3 axes exist as **Economy**, **Time** and **People**, making the circle of 3 coordinates concurrent. Imagine the axis of people to rotate as an A axis labelled **“Compassion”** and the Economy as **“Interdependence”**, what comes alive is a sphere of an ecology - a mutual existence in pluralistic polarities - where more than circular ways of the existence could be plausible.





# Chowk and Charpai

The true cacophony of **Indian streets**, a social fabric we call “chowk” - a meeting place, **the urban living room** of India that is today. Chowk is where design is imagined as a collaborative of multiple hearts, souls that sync in unison and hands that create stories that remain unaltered with the passage of time.





# From Waste to Wonder

The Design Village (TDV) partnered with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in India to upcycle **old merchandise** into meaningful new creations. H.E. Ms. Marisa Gerards, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to India, introduced the upcycled merchandise and expressed her commitment to solving **societal challenges** through **design**.



Embassy of the  
Kingdom of the Netherlands

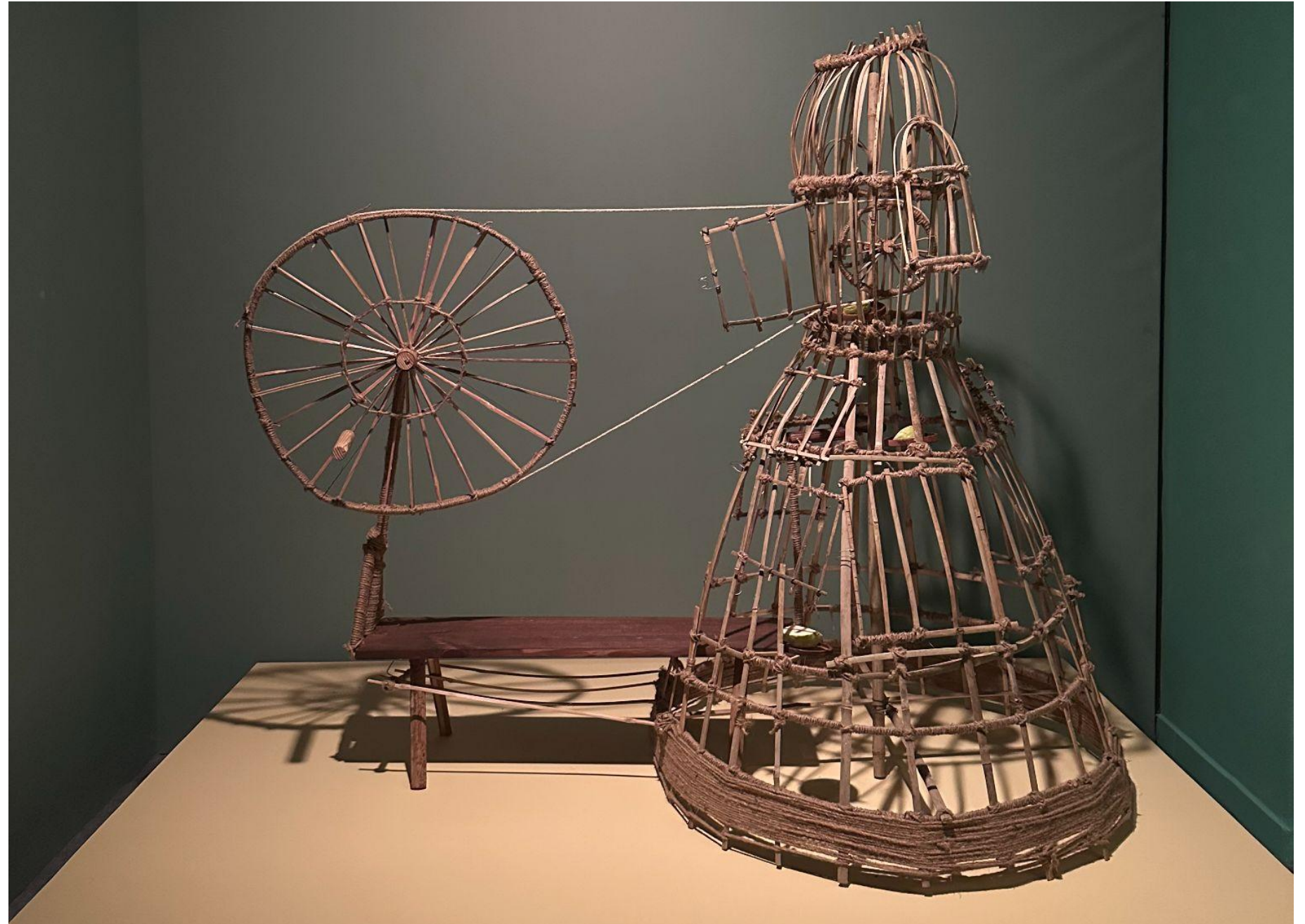




# Oggetti tra le Righe

Produced by the Italian Cultural Institute in New Delhi, "**Objects Between the Lines**" celebrates the interplay between two creative disciplines—literature and design—from Italy and India.

curated by: Dr Andrea Anastasio,  
Domitilla Dardi

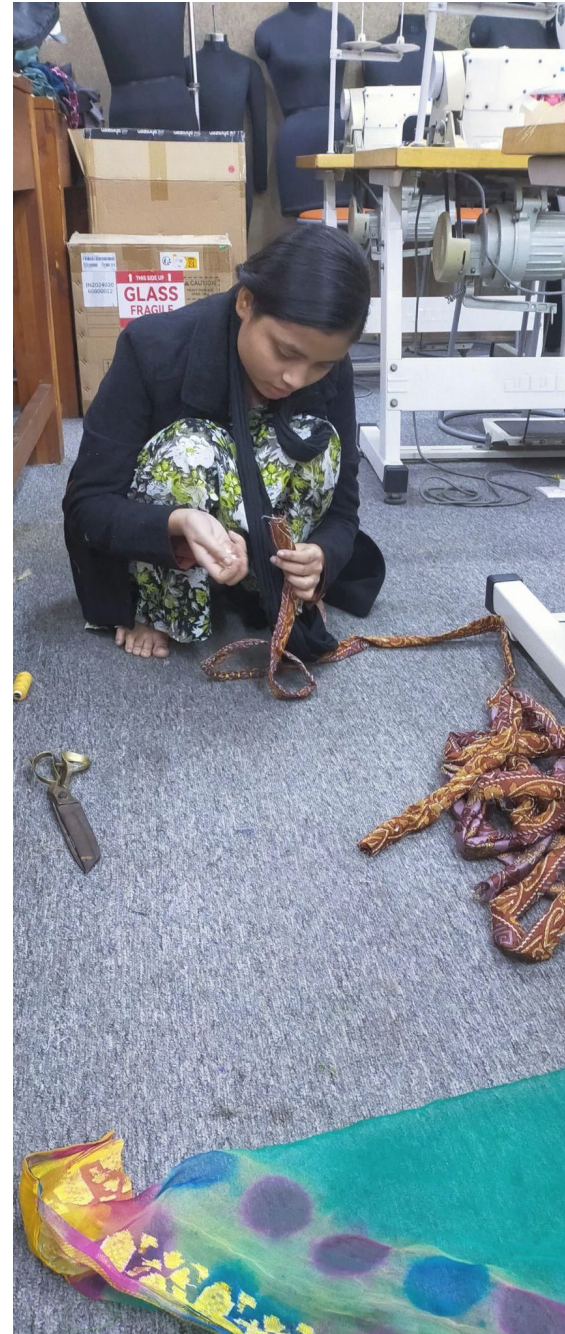




# Preserving a/vocation

A revival of **old textiles** into merchandise that can transcend passage of time and live on in a **second life**. Imagined by the students of TDV and **underprivileged** women supported by Savera Welfare Trust.

Dr Melanie Flory conducted a masterclass, sensitising them through **“Cognitive Reframing Mediated by Fabric Related Sensory Input”**





The background image shows three large, circular concrete tunnels in a desert landscape at dusk. The tunnels are arranged in a line, with the largest one in the foreground and two smaller ones further back. The warm light of the setting sun is visible through the openings, creating a strong contrast with the dark silhouettes of the tunnels. The ground is sandy with sparse, low-lying desert vegetation.

# Life-Centred Designing for the Pluriverse