

The Legal Meltdown of Prada and Kolhapuri: GI Loopholes, IP Vulnerabilities, Cultural Appropriation and a Strategic Transition from Foreign Extraction to Local Sneaker Production

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Abstract:

Following the 2025 *Kolhapuri Chappal Controversy* by Prada, this paper explores how international luxury brands engage in the couture theft of Indian artisanal products into premium high-end products. Perceived through GI loopholes, IP vulnerabilities, and cultural appropriation; this practice of couture brands are a neo-colonial tactic expressing how Western markets fetishize and glorify these products, while local artisans who create them remain marginalized and sidelined, creating a cultural/economic vulnerability. This research traverses the physical and epistemic circuits through which Kolhapuri Chappals and likened artisanal artifacts are de-colonized and repackaged across luxury and fast-fashion trajectories. Archival knowledge, visual and marketing critiques, interviews of craftsmen/craftswomen and brand founders, governmental protections via GI tags and IPs, are taken under consideration following the examination of commodification, appropriation and identity struggle of Indian artisanship and fashion. The research counteracts with the emergent tides of homegrown brands, prominently *Gully Labs* and *Comet* that attempt to capture due representation in a global marketplace, eventually concluding with a meaningful discussion on the ills of cultural appropriation and GI tag policies, widening the prospects of all-around innovation across the sectors concerned.

Keywords: Indian Artisanship, Cultural Appropriation, Commodification, Consumerism, Indigenous Fashion Identities, Ethical Fashion Collaborations.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Context

The 2025 Milan Fashion Week remains not only an extravagant fashion event, but a reminder of how instances of neo-colonialism nonchalantly persist taking undue aid of couture ecosystems, which concerns the the Indian subcontinent as a whole, while becoming a thriving point of critical discussions on social media forums. What caught the notice of the Indian populace was the uncalled and unjust re-branding of the iconic Indian Kolhapuri chappal that has adorned the feet of Indian forefathers for centuries. Prada's launch of the footwear with an astronomical selling price of 1.2 lakh rupees, remains a dig at haute couture while also becoming an "instance where the might of giant commercial entities operating from foreign soil succeeded in eclipsing the identity and legitimate interests of economically weaker communities of Indian entrepreneurs." (Jain, 2025) Eventually the slew of criticisms, online and offline drew the filing of a PIL to the Bombay High Court by Ganesh S. Hingmire drawing an immediate withdrawal, an apology, an award to authentic Indian artisans, and collaborative efforts mandated by the Court. (Bhaskar, 2025). Despite such an attempt, Indian fashion brands are recently seen rejecting the need for validation from such Western/European giants and are now protesting via a proactive stance that posits an active counter to couture theft. Since, the greatest defense against cultural theft exacts a preemptive original culture ownership with the aid of a contemporary modern narrative, brands like Gully Labs and Comet are therefore, seen prioritizing *desi* Indian aesthetic silhouettes, nullifying the attempt of foreign forces trying to blatantly mimic cultural efforts, without any credit. *Gully no.004* for instance, poses as a homegrown re-branding of the iconic Kolhapuri Chappal, codified via the underscore which says --- "The Kolhapuri, reimagined in premium leather. Same soul, new stride." (Gully Labs n.d.). Incorporating the soul of the Kolhapuri, rugged leathery structure, iconic hand-braided straps, and an overall hand-made construction, *Gully Labs's* revamping of the Kolhapuri Chappal, is not only an attempt at bringing Indian fashion

functionality to a global platform, but also to liberate from European middlemen, who claim more than they can offer. Along with the attempt to offer an Indian brand to the world, *Gully Labs*'s purpose is also to give Indian *Karigars* (artisans), their due credit, which otherwise remains anonymous and unaccredited for. Using Indian exclusive stitching techniques like Bengal's *Kantha* embroidery and *Kullu* Weaving, *Gully Labs*'s in-sourced *karigar* force is celebrated as the foundational pillar of the brand's image and IP which with the added protection of the GI tag is able to ward off any attempts at creating synthetic, cheap, and undulated Western knock-offs. Similarly, *Comet*'s attempt at revamping Indian shoe culture also stands out due to its treatment of Indian made sneakers as a canvas for raw individuality and an attempt to reduce dependence borrowed from Western cultures pertaining to the shadows of Nike *Jordans*, Puma *Suedes* or Adidas *Stan Smiths* and *Sambas*.

1.2. Problem Statement

Founded by Charles Frederick Worth in 1911, Haute Couture is "a high-end fashion category that falls under the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, who dictates what qualifies as haute couture and who lands on the official calendar" (Becker). Despite Haute Couture's sophisticated and highly elite reputation, it resides upon colonial practices where raw materials for textiles were manufactured via cheap labour. Instances for such point to the *Indigo Revolt* (1859-1860), locally known as *Nil Bidroho*, which erupted primarily since "there was a lot of demand for the blue dye in Europe, which had a status similar to exotic commodities like tea, coffee, silk, and gold." (Zeneger.News, 2020). Similarly, the *Muslin* textile which was once the pride of East Bengal (now Bangladesh), referred as *woven wind* pushed artisans to poverty due to the vacuum created by British colonizers who "destroyed India's domestic textile industry to sell in India cheap cloth made with machines in Lancashire." (ET Online, 2020). This insistence on neo-colonial practices is further reformed by the traversal of the fine cracks in IP protections which superficially protects but leaves the fragile third-world fashion markets vulnerable. Couture Theft, which also indirectly aids racial plagiarism, retains evidence because as per Judith Bussé "is not always easy to objectively define the scope of protection of a particular intellectual property right in relation to previous designs and (seasonal) trends." (Fashion United, 2024). Such attempts finds further encouragement because "Unlike literature or art, most clothing designs lack comprehensive legal protection, especially under the U.S. "useful article" doctrine, which excludes clothing cuts and shapes from copyright coverage." (jnrconsultancy group.com, 2025). With Prada's unethical mimicry of the Kolhapuri Chappal, it has highlighted the loopholes of GI tag protection in India that lacks strengthening outside the Indian domicile, leveraging on which "many multinational brands can freely use and replicate traditional Indian designs abroad without facing any major legal consequences," (Legallogic, 2025). With the cost-cutting enabled fashion ecosystem that evades its attribution to genuine credibility "Artisan communities suffer economically as global brands mass-produce similar designs, undercutting traditional producers and leaving them invisible and underpaid." (Legallogic, 2025). With the aspect of cultural appropriation, "marked by the careless or exploitative use of cultural symbols, patterns, or garments, often stripped of their original meaning and context." (Yuan et.al. 2024), a figure of exoticization ensues, which as per Madelyn Shaw "can be represented as viewing "the other" in a romantic light, that is, mining other cultures in search of styles, patterns or motifs –everything related to art and creativity– with the sole purpose of producing unique marketable designs." (Cordova, 2020) aimed at the intentional/unintentional diminishing of indigenous artifacts i.e. Prada's simplistic labeling of the Kolhapuri chappal "as "leather flat sandals" with no reference to their Indian connection." (Legallogic, 2025). While globalization has made markets vulnerable to foreign attempts at unaccounted mimicry, existing literature on the similar ontological inquiries show a prominent gap with regard to the rise of homegrown brands like *Gully Labs* and *Comet* and many others along the same lines whose attempts radically fill the loopholes prominent in Indian IP and GI protectorates. Changing the script by making sure that Western or European fashion houses are exempted from treating the Indian fashion ecosystem as a design pool, engaging in a narrative of counter-appropriation, Indian fashion brands, pertaining to the ones mentioned above, are reinstating the fact how the future of Indian fashion isn't supposed to be rooted anymore in Western findings but rather more inclined to owning individuality.

1.3. Research Objectives

Following the introductory discussions on Indian artisanship focused on Kolhapuri Chappals, Western/European appropriation, and the counter by homegrown Indian brands in the attempt to establish an independent ecosystem viable for the artisan labour force, entrepreneurs and customers, this research addresses the following objectives:

- To assess how globalization irregularities enable global haute couture brands to engage in an unethical mimicry of indigenous artifact properties with evasion to cross-country GI enforcement.
- To address how Indian Sneaker entrepreneurial efforts combine raw indigenous heritage into luxurious contemporary consumer commodity via marketing strategies.
- To investigate the developmental shift to an independent, self-sustaining, and localized form of artisan manufactured model, from an extraction-only based crafting ecosystem.

2. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

2.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study hinges on the contribution of two primary theories to the literature on the aspects of marketing, globalization, and development of emerging markets

- **Decolonial Marketing Theory:** Existent literature on marketing implications endure the belief that foreign cultural appropriation conjured by couture theft attempts are not only a recurring ethical violation without any safeguarding, but also a legal stalemate where both parties i.e. the Western/European couture firm and the Indian artisan community come to a standstill. The instances of which are synonymous to cases like US's *Navajo Nation Corp. vs. Urban Outfitters Inc.* (2012-2016) where the former "alleged that Urban Outfitters and its affiliates used the "Navajo" name and trademark without permission in their product lines." (studicata.com, 2026) or The Masai Intellectual Property Initiative (MIPI) vs. Gloal Luxury House (2016-present) which "was established to address unauthorised use of Maasai branding by more than 1,000 companies that provided no benefit to the Maasai people." (Masai Intellectual Property Initiative, n.d.). Hence, forwarding the research exposition by establishing the pragmatic framework of a market-instigated counter appropriation marred by a decolonized marketing theory aimed at removing the exclusive hold of foreign markets, demonstrations can therefore accrue to the departure of Indian EMEs (Emerging Market Enterprises) as passive sufferers of couture thefts. This is also suggestive of how a flipped narrative restructure poses those EMEs as now active reclaimers who combine traditions of native designing with legally and universally appropriate formats of production i.e. the homegrown sneaker brands.
- **Global South-Exclusive Consumer Culture Theory:** With the existence of traditional consumer culture theory which "has been built upon systems that inadvertently, or sometimes intentionally, amplified certain voices and perspectives while sidelining others." (Sustainability Directory), it is also responsible for the creation of the dichotomy between *xenocentrism* i.e. "attributed to consumers' desire to own foreign brands as a means of bolstering self-esteem, stemming from the perceived inferiority of domestic brands" (Rojas-Méndez et.al., 2026) and *ethnocentrism* i.e. "an individual's predisposition to favor and exhibit bias towards those who share similar cultural backgrounds while displaying aversion towards those who are culturally dissimilar." (Baber et.al., 2024). However, this study exemplifies the suggestive presence of a third hybrid consumer ecosystem termed *glocal ethnocentrism*, a level up where the attributes of both the formerly mentioned consumer behaviour are combined to execute a sphere where products satisfy the hunger for global luxury while conscious investing upon domestic brands who support, preserve and protect local cultural artifacts and heritage practices, synonymous in effort to North American indigenous brands like *B. Yellowtail* which "prides itself on sharing authentic Indigenous design and placing community and culture at the heart of its brand ethos." (Jenkins, 2022) or *Eighth Generation* who pose as "the first Indigenous-owned brand to produce Native-designed wool blankets." (Jenkins, 2022)

2.2. Practical Contributions

Considering the practical crux of this study, this section provides an undertaking strategy, prioritizing guidance for entrepreneurial effort-makers and future policy enforcement as the navigation of irregular global markets ensues.

- This study provides a practical insight for lifestyle-brand focused entrepreneurs based in developing economies like India. Demonstrating that the most effective protective measure against couture theft is not by limiting efforts to low-margin production and slow-moving engagements in legal disputes concerning unaccredited efforts, but by high-investment induced design-focused branding. Such high-end efforts would not only remain fool-proof to foreign attempts at appropriated thefts but also establish ownership of local cultural narratives without the need for out-sourcing, while building brand equity at the comfort of home-ground advantage. For example, Native American brands like *Ginew* which are “all made in the United States; they call the vibe of their clothes “Native Americana,” fusing a workwear-inspired vibe with traditional motifs from their respective tribes (including Ojibwa, Oneida, and Mohican).” (Allaire, 2019) and *Noa Blanket Co.*, a Maori brand which addresses itself as “more than just a blanket that can give warmth, calm a restless body and reduce anxiety, but a work of art - a taonga, a collaboration of culture and colour, a woven representation of our nation’s strength and resilience.” (@NoaBlanket.co, n.d.)
- Engaging in a reality check for responsible organizations of policy-makers and other regulatory bodies such as the GI Registry, of the incompetence of the singularity of the GI tag as a protector for the artisan community against foreign encroachment, this paper highlights the need for the revamping of IP protection into milestones of economic development via the creation of active commercial pipelines. The findings suggest the incorporation of active connectivity of afflicted artisanal communities i.e. the Kolhapuri artisans who “are now only 15,000–20,000 Kolhapuri artisans which is a steep drop from before, while luxury brands profit from their craft’s cachet.” (Legalogic, 2025) to modern design innovations, digital commerce think-tanks, and domestic venture investments. Thereby, promising the exclusive pool of financial support via retention of local heritage which should also engage in the overall development of the domestic economy.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design: Qualitative Case Study

Aligning with the cause and affects implied via real-world scenarios amidst highly volatile market spheres, a dual-case study exploration is addressed to be the methodology for this study. This remains in alignment to the Kolhapuri controversy, followed by the counter by newly emerging indigenous markets.

3.2. Case Selection Template

Using purposive sampling, this study engages in the analysis of two prominently opposed discourses concern the Indian fashion footwear scene, where the first case study would engage in the narrative of extraction i.e. The Prada-Kolhapuri Controversy and the collections released in 2025 without due credit. The analysis for this segment of the case study shall review GI documentary regulations, followed by secondarily sourced legal texts based on the lawsuit, and addressal of public statements on online & offline platforms and press archives. The second case study will primarily focus on the narrative of reclamation and/or counter appropriation via Indian footwear brands like Gully Labs and Comet, where the analysis shall hinge upon the founder/designer verdicts and visions via interviews, followed by marketing architecture that covers the social media framing of such brands which resonate with USPs such as *Made in India, for the World*, as well as direct reviews by consumers via news/social media collectives.

3.3. Qualitative Data Findings

The qualitative findings of this research are thoroughly cross checked across three segments of enquiry --- corporate documents, legal dispute narratives, and consumer and entrepreneur feedback, in an attempt to curb biased perspectives.

4. Case Study Analysis And Findings

4.1. The Curious Case of Kolhapuri Chappals and Prada amid Regulation Loopholes

Kolhapuri Chappals within India does not only attribute to a fashion commodity, but also holds behind an 800+ year old history which collectively covers royal patronages, community pride, generational lineages, all while doubling as a comfortable fashion statement worn by the common man and celebrities alike. Gaining traction after being adorned by Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj of the Maratha Dynansty, the Kolhapuri chappal forms the nexus of Indian resourcefulness and aesthetics where ---

Each pair was made without nails. The leather was treated in natural oils, sun-dried, then cut and stitched. Each design was unique to the artisan's family style. Artisans cut the leather, shape the soles, and make the T-strap by hand. They work from small homes, not factories, passing their skills through generations. This keeps the cottage industry going. (@Brut India, 2025)

Despite being sustainable with a price point not ranging more than ₹1000 and known by various aliases “like Kapashi, Paytaan, Kachkadi, Bakkalnali, and Pukri, each tied to the village they come from” (@Brut India, 2025), the Kolhapuri chappal found itself in the midst of inappropriate representation, where Prada in June, 2025 at the Milan Fashion week appropriated them simply as *Leather Flat Sandals*. The appropriation also goes to the extent where the event also “handed out leather “ring” tokens at the event, highlighting the toe-loop design that is a signature element of the Kolhapuri chappal.” (The Economic Times, 2025). With, Ganesh S. Hingmire’s Public Interest Litigation (PIL) at the Bombay High Court on 2nd July, 2025, it hinges upon a collective demand of justice via the following conditions ---

- The footwear in question is permanently ordered not to be offered for sale.
- An apology from Prada for not indicating who made the boots.
- An award to the registered GI holders of the Kolhapuri chappals.
- Prada and the Kolhapuri artisan communities will be required to work together under the monitoring of the court. (Bhaskar)

While, this has resulted “in dismissal on the ground of locus standi and availability of statutory remedy under the GI Act,” (Jain, 2025), addressing the cause that “the authorized users of the GI of Kolhapuri Chhapal on whom LIDKAR and LIDCOM had not initiated the case.” (Dey, 2025). With, Prada’s post-controversy actions immediately seeing rectifications, where a team from Prada physically negotiated with the artisan community of Kolhapur, reconstituting in a future collaborative effort (Mateen, 2025), Prada has, as of 2026, revamped their approach with collaborative ties to LIDCOM, LIDKAR, NIFT, and KILT, where their website presents it as such ---

Prada limited-edition collection of sandals, combines traditional techniques with Prada’s contemporary design and premium materials to create a unique dialogue between Indian heritage and modern luxury expression. The collection has been manufactured in India by skilled artisans from Maharashtra and Karnataka regions. (PRADA, n.d.)

While it is quite rare to see a couture brand of Prada’s stature being responsive in the admissal of their mistakes, it has also announced a fully funded training program aimed at improving the sale of proceeds while supporting the Indian artisans. However, the matter of concern here is the despite Prada’s admission and pro-activeness, the highlight has immediately conceded to the lack of reinforcement to GI tags, which are, in this juncture, serves as

the last line of defense against foreign fashion infringement. The Geographical Indication of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999 addresses pertinent section where,

- Section 2(e) defines a geographical indication (GI) as a mark indicating that the goods are from a geography; the recognised quality or reputation for the goods must exist and is considered due to that geographical origin.
- Section 21 identifies the infringement of a registered geographical indication, particularly concerning the use of the mark or which creates a false impression, or unfairly uses it.
- Section 22 protects against copiers, deception, and unfair use.
- Section 24 gives protection against trademark registration by unauthorized persons. (Bhaskar, 2025)

However, “there is no legal mechanism enforceable by Indian stakeholders at the international level to be able to protect themselves against cultural appropriation by foreign entities.” (Jain, 2025) and thus stands to reason that it “may still not inure to their benefit for want of viable global enforcement mechanism from Indian soil.” (Jain, 2025).

Despite the lack of coverage, *the Trademarks Act* under section 27 became a saving grace which duly met the artisan concerns on breach of goodwill, false representation and damages dealt to the image and artisanship as a whole ---

1. *Goodwill: The product (Kolhapuri chappals) is a well-known and respected product.*

2. *Misrepresentation: The sandals look similar to the Kolhapuri sandals, and customers may mistakenly think Indian artisans are affiliated, inspired, or endorse the sandals.*

3. *Harm: Taking attention and money away from the original producers (i.e., Indian artisan communities), such deception harms reputational and economic interests.* (Bhaskar, 2025)

While the World Trade Organization’s TRIPS agreement (1995) formulates article 22 preventing “the misuse of GIs that mislead consumers or amount to unfair competition” (Legalogic, 2025), and article 23 which “provides a stronger protection to wines and spirits, the same level of protection is not offered to traditional handicrafts such as Kolhapuri chappals.” (Jain, 2025), the conundrum primarily relies upon the overlooking of subtle loopholes within and without the Indian jurisdiction, which Prada unconsciously took advantage of. Furthermore, Prada’s non-admission of the term *Kolhapuri chappals* was all that was required to bypass other international laws such as *the Paris Convention* (1883) under Article 10bis which “obliges countries to provide effective safeguards against unfair competition, including false or misleading geographical designations.” (Legalogic, 2025). This is also followed by in-sourced mass machine labour which took a detour from *The Madrid Agreement* (1891), a special provision under the former which “prohibits the use of false indications of source and permits seizure of such goods upon importation.” (Legalogic, 2025). While the term, *Indian* was omitted, a means to address cultural appropriation and relatability disguised via the tag, *inspired* was used, followed by the lack of pinpointed designation of geographical coordinates and regional details which allowed Prada to exploit Kolhapuri Chappals’ superficial protection ---

GI law in India does not prevent visual style, aesthetics, or design aspects from being copied, it does prevent the misuse of names or labels. "Kolhapuri chappal" is not the name used for Prada, so it may be a little bit problematic to prove direct GI infringement as alleged within the current framework of the law. (Bhaskar, 2025)

While Prada’s collaborative reassessment has lead to a positive deal that serves the interests of both parties, such actions of couture theft rarely see rectification and with the existent loopholes and cracks persistent in trading, design, spatial and IP protection, it is likely to recur. However, similar instances of collaborative efforts denote *Christian Dior’s* collaboration with the Mexican artisans of the *Chiapas*, *Oaxaca*, and *Puelba* communities under the supervision of Creative Director, Maria Grazia Chiuri as a “way to show the boutiques of the world, the local markets of Tlaxiaco where they sell and the Mexican and foreign buyers who visit the association’s festivities that the art of embroidering a blouse for three months deserves to be recognized and remunerated highly.”(Gallón,

2023). Unlike the attempts of Gaston Vuitton, heir and grandson of the fashion magnate *Louis Vuitton*, who is infamously credited with organizing the controversial *pavillon nègre* in 1931 which saw the displays of African Masks and other oriental items and “was seen as an attempt to justify French colonial rule in West Africa and Indochina.” (Jasmine, 2023)

4.2. The Rise of *Gully Labs* and *Comet* as Market Reclaimers and Guardians from Couture Theft

Of late, a pro-active counter-appropriation drive has been carried over by homegrown Indian brands like *Gully Labs* and *Comet* who are trying to establish a *India for the World*-concerned directive. While couture brands like Prada establishes cultural appropriation via unaccredited extraction i.e. severing the regional sentiment of the cultural artifact of a third world pertaining to its design, and then charging luxury premium rates for it; brands like *Gully Labs* or *Comet* avoid such actions by removing the necessity of the traditional/easily bypassable GI tag authentication, and instead rely upon modern marketing strategies, indigenous narratives and aesthetics, and universally acceptable formats i.e. the premium sneaker silhouette crafted by Nike, Adidas or Puma.

Gully Labs (2023) established by Arjun Singh and Animesh Mishra was primarily fueled by the former’s vision that would fill the void of “culturally Indian yet aspirationally global” (Sil, 2026) sneaker commodities. The Delhi-based company with its incorporation of the *Devanagri* script in its brand logo and products, seeks to position itself as a global giant in the sneaker market that would coagulate Indian handcrafted artisanship, Indian sensibilities, international quality standards and a denial of Western imitation which has as of now, bagged “an offer from Boat co-founder Aman Gupta, who agreed to invest Rs 1 crore for 0.57% equity, valuing the company at about Rs 175 crore.” (FE Business, 2026) with their 2026 *Shark Tank* presentation. Instances of *Gully Labs*’ incorporation of Indian aesthetics and sensibilities can be understood firstly via their Kolhapuri Chappal inspired redesign titled as *Gully Number 4*, previously referred, which they describe as follows ---

The Kolhapuri wasn't designed. It was arrived at, through generations of hands that knew leather the way a farmer knows soil. It has walked temple floors, market streets, monsoon mud, and still showed up looking like itself. Gully Number 4 doesn't explain that story. It just carries it forward, in the braid, in the grain, in the weight of something that was never trying to impress anyone. Some things don't need reinventing. They just need to keep moving. (Gully Labs)

Handcrafted and made via in-sourced karigars skilled in the craft, *Gully Labs*’ *Gully Number 4* is not the only gun in their arsenal. Their products also cover other regional art styles as incorporated in *Gully Number 003-Amra Ochre* which is said to be “Rooted in Punjab’s iconic Jutti, this silhouette reworks Tilla embroidery into a refined modern form.” (Gully Labs, n.d.). Furthermore, *Gully Number 001- Saaj Orange* ensembles “Featuring matchstick art on the leather side panels and rangoli-inspired perforations on the toe. All hand-stitched by seasoned artisans.” (Gully Labs, n.d.), while *Naadu* from the same line carries Keralite inspirations particularly Onam where “Malayalam typography is incorporated into the design, embedding regional language directly into the shoe.” (Gully Labs, n.d.) which doubles with the traditional *kantha* boat stitching. Indian philosophical epistemology also finds representation via their *Dvaita* line of sneakers as a representation of Indian duality ---

Dvaita doesn't dissolve the self into the universe, it lets both exist, fully, at once. You and the world. The individual and the infinite. Not in conflict, not in merger, but in quiet coexistence. There is a stillness in accepting that two things can be entirely true without one cancelling the other. Wear that knowing. (Gully Labs, n.d.)

Selling something in which Indians would be proud of, *Gully Labs* “boldly prompts us to reflect on what we truly know about the people, events, and traditions that continue to define and shape modern India.” (Pathak, n.d.). With Tofler’s review suggesting a jump “to Rs 2.9 crore in FY25, with a loss of Rs 1 crore,” (FE Business, 2026) and overseas market collection amounting to 25% coming for US, UK, UAE, Singapore, Australia and Canada and an aim for reaching a revenue of ₹100 crore by FY28 (FE Business, 2026), India’s *Gully Labs* can hence be hailed as a prominent contender across the global sneaker market who not only protects but also supports the Indian economy while attaining due trading, crafting and copyright responsibilities. On the contrary, *Comet* treads upon a different direction, with its unapologetic tagline --- *Never Shy, Never Sorry* served by “a

mix of bold design choices and purposeful storytelling” (Jagwani, 2025) aimed to cater to the potential rebelliousness of the Indian youth. Founded in the same year as *Gully Labs*, its founders Utkarsh Gupta and Dishant Daryani also fashion similar background with the founders of the former, and seem to cater to an outlaw-ish representation where “It’s bold design details and messaging reinforce a defiant, independent mindset, appealing to those who reject convention in favor of self-expression.” (Jagwani, 2025). Comet’s unique appeal can primarily be addressed via its *Mango Sneakers* which “shipped in a box filled with hay, tapped into nostalgia” while its *Ludo Sneakers* pose as “An echo of a game where you were unafraid of twists, turns and chases. To be fearless like the kid who was Never Shy, Never Sorry about their moves.” (Comet, n.d.) while “Mirroring the board’s 4 houses - blue, red, yellow and green, symbolizing the playful nature of the game.” (Comet, n.d.) With its generation of ₹ 7.86 cr within its first fiscal year and a gradually moving valuation that is soon to surpass ₹ 160 cr (Jagwani, 2025), *Comet* asserts a community-fueled identity via the term *Cometeers* --- a uniting force of sneaker lovers who wear Comet’s sneakers, thereby asserting a prideful identity that seeks to isolate itself from existing global sneaker giants like Adidas, Nike and Puma.

5. Discussions And Themes Involved

5.1. The Eternal Conquest for Authenticity over Plagiarism

Plagiarism, often diluted under the garb of inspiration is a thing the creative and artistic sector always gets away with. Prada also tried to evade the same by vaguely representing Indian cultural elements tied to the Kolhapuri Chappal via its dubbing of *Leather flat sandals*. However, Prada’s non-association to the Indian collective sensibility with regard to cultural symbolism and history became boon to homegrown brands like *Gully Labs* and *Comet* which latch onto the same via their outspoken association to native authenticity. Allowing them to command premium prices from domestic consumers, these brands justify the making and marketing of such sneaker products, which primarily rely upon Indian artisan workforce and culture, minus the heavy white-washing from Western forces. While, sneakers itself carry Western connotations where as per contemporary trends of fashion suggest that “everything is a remix” (@aniketd 2025), an Instagram reel highlight the subtleties of it which often go unnoticed --

Previously, people have pointed out that these Comet Shoes look heavily inspired by these other sneakers called the Bapesta(s), and that’s funny because these Bapestas are essentially artsy street culture rip-offs of the Nike Airforce 1s. And now there’s apparently a new Indian sneaker brand called NoGrav, which has in turn copied Comet. (@aniketd, 2025)

With a decentralized stance remaining pertinent in this regard, the foundations of the shoes are revamped to carry the weight of Indian culture, heritage and artisanship, where they are no more treated as a exotic souvenirs for tourists to be taken home, but pristine commodities that aim to represent a globally sustainable and cultural fashion statements.

5.2. Flipping the Script: Limiting Imperial Encroachments

Traditionally mandated globalized models of trade and commerce as well as the neo-colonial philosophies often treat the Global South i.e. India as a *Pinterest* board from where ideas attain a Western hue, and sold back as finished expensive goods. Prada’s revamping of their copied Kolhapuri Chappal project and its resale at the price of approximately, ₹1 lakh, addresses this instance and exploitation via the notions of *xenocentrism*. Furthermore, it also addresses Fanon’s viewpoints as stated in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1961) where he suggest how colonialism is not only satisfied via control but also empties the native’s psyche in a bid to destroy his physical and cultural identity. Since, ethnocentric actions via the protectorates by LIDCOM, LIDKAR and GI authority combined could be the defensive against Prada’s plagiarism, a middle-ground provided by sneaker brands like *Gully Labs* and *Comet* comes as a hybridized final grace. Breaking the dependency upon exploitative Western forces and the slowly paced government-aided economic co-operatives, *Gully Labs* and *Comet* have managed to create an ecosystem which shall pave the path for similar efforts in the future. While the previous mention that the foundational product of sneakers shall remain fundamentally Western by origin, Indian homegrown brands as the ones mentioned, have managed to adopt it as a borrowed canvas for collective cultural

representation. For instance, *Gully Labs* categorizes their sneaker produced via the term *Gully Number* which alludes to the Indian way of how localized street-ways are connected, metaphorically referring to establishing synonymous connection, while additional Indianized jargons justify the same, such as *Aangan* (courtyard) *blue* marketed to be “inspired by the courtyard at the heart of every Indian home, where memory and movement begin,” (Gully Labs) or *Khoj* (Discovery) green marketed to be “inspired by the spirit of discovery that runs through India's streets and forests.” (Gully Labs). Such instances not only reflects through the creative storytelling done around its marketing, but also in its physicality which quotes the combined makings of Indian craft culture, nostalgia, and contemporary trends, aimed towards claiming ownership.

5.3. Socio-Economic Implications

The implications that were assessed in the wake of the Prada-Kolhapuri controversy can be further categorized via two segments: the micro-economic aspects assessing the impact on craft communities i.e. The *Charmkars* and impending government interventions and the macro-economic aspects that address the development of the Indian sneaker market. Firstly, the sole ownership of the Kolhapuri Chappal belongs primarily to Maharashtra's LIDCOM and Karnataka's LIDKAR, which function as state owned subsidiaries, whereas its establishment with central institutions could have been more viable. As per the press-release issued on August 2025 pertaining a clarified stance against the controversy, it addresses only “financial supports for GI registration of the traditional crafts under the Research & Development component of the National Handicrafts Development Programme (NHDP)” (Press Information Bureau, 2025) are covered by the office of Development Commissioner of Handicrafts, with the addition of seminars and marketing events. Furthermore “craft demonstration programmes in International Trade Fairs and Exhibitions, provide support to Export Promotion Councils (EPCs), organize Design and Capacity Building programme, facilitate Digital Onboarding and e-Commerce Enablement to promote GI-Tagged Crafts in both domestic & international markets.” (Press Information Bureau, 2025) are mandated to promote export potentiality. The pertinent point of concern that is portrayed via such causalities, indicate a gap that features a disparity amongst government sanctioned grants and the Charmkar community which could have purposefully directed towards the creation of enforced trade relations and successful dialogue initiations with foreign governments curing the ailments of future uncertainties, portraying a missed opportunity. Contrary to such slow-paced government policy actions, the Indian Sneaker market with the aid of homegrown startups such as *Gully Labs* and *Comet* which are “growing at a compound annual growth rate of 5.65% from 2026-2034” (imarc, 2025), in which Comet “sold out 200 pairs of its Comet X Naru limited-edition drop within an hour, with customers lining up before store opening.” (imarc, 2025), while Gully Labs “raised ₹8.7 crore in a seed funding round led by Zerpearl VC to expand its product portfolio and retail presence, reflecting growing investor confidence in design-led Indian footwear.” (imarc, 2025). Collaborations with international brands also address the materialization of a globalized space where *Gully Labs* stands out with its collaboration with CMF by Nothing via *Gully Number 1- Xoloni Orange*, which is “A limited edition canvas sneaker born from the meeting of Indian craft and modern technology.” (Gully Labs, n.d.). On the other hand, *Comet's* collaboration primarily constitutes with the board game company, Monopoly “celebrating 90 Years of Monopoly” (Comet, n.d.), with addition to *Naru*, *Farak*, among others. These Indian startups rooted across indigenous sentiments, hence, testify that long-run economic welfare is directly rooted with the localization of brand-equity and supply chains within the domestic market, unlike current standings where loopholes across trade and judiciary are of the essence.

5.4. Morally Enforced and Digitally Powered Consumer Reaction

Prada's plagiaristic action stands as a learning milestone where it not only highlighted the ill-practices of the haute couture fashion industry with whom it is associated with, but also pointed out the loopholes in domestic managements and judiciary. But by the same hand, it also enforced the efforts of *Gully Labs* and *Comet*. Sandwiched in its midst is the common-man, who has to choose cultural pride over foreign encroachment on cultural identity. While, Prada poses a welcoming stance considering the controversy, it was the public outrage along digital means which worked against the insensitive treatment of a prized artifact of Indian culture i.e. the Kolhapuri Chappal. As per NDTV Lifestyle's quotation, the reactions ranged from sarcastic commentary --- “Turmeric latte inspired by haldi doodh.” to serious allegations --- “Colonial BS. Still have the audacity to insist

it's inspired." (Purwar, 2026). While, the Indian reactions to Prada's act remain justified, they also reveal the lacuna that India doesn't have any similar couture brands that could represent them on a global scale, let alone one which they could pride themselves in. Hence, comes *Gully Labs* and *Comet* which not only weaponize the idea of being globally presentable, but also become a leading fashion icon born and made in India. Latching onto the aspect of creative storytelling to hit the emotional recesses of the Indian masses, *Gully Labs* puts into action the due representation of Indian craftsmanship via handcrafted efforts made by skilled artisan labour, while *Comet* lays over the canvas provided by international brands like Adidas, Puma, and Nike, with a more rugged and domestic belonging. Public reaction to *Gully Labs* are often accounted by its exponential growth while riding over Indian aesthetic sensibilities --- "Fast forward to 2026. They are doing 30 crores in annual revenue, went from selling 10 sneakers a month to 1500 pairs a month. Built their own 10,000 ft² factory in Noida with over 50 karigars" (abvaidya, 2025). shripal_gandhi also addresses that "Today *Gully Labs* is doing over 2 crore rupees monthly run rate." (2025). While, *Comet* is particularly applauded for its ingenious designs, particularly *Comet*'s orange drop --- "Comet just dropped a sneaker which you can peel it off just like an orange" (theshoeunboxer, 2025), along with its pertinent comparison to *Gully Labs*, addressed via online debates flagged often with #*Gully_Labs_vs_Comet*, where *Comet*'s price point contrary to *Gully Labs* was applauded. Hence, the primary cause which was primarily supposed to be about an Indian-originated global sneaker representation, has also turned into an in-house battle for the fittest, where both are simultaneously applauded and criticized on various respects, while increasing the promise of improved production and innovation, along with the entry of other homegrown brands with similar visions.

6. Conclusion And Recommendations

6.1. Theoretical Synthesis

The Indian market, since its colonial history, has been an extracting and re-selling ground for colonial agents. What initiated via Indigo plantations and Muslin over-exploitation, still persists via couture thefts of which Prada's Kolhapuri Chappal controversy remains a pertinent highlight. It must also be addressed that the Prada-Kolhapuri controversy of 2025 is not the only event of its kind as similar incidents persist across various contexts. For instance, Prada's metallic tote bag which ironically represents the Indian train floors for "at a staggering price of Rs 280,000" became subject to comments addressing sarcastic similarities to toilet floors and commentary depicting the irony of "carrying luggage on public transport." (Singh, 2025). Similarly, *Nordstorm*, an American luxury retailer and *Pubeco*, a Japanese lifestyle brand also appropriates via the dubbing of the common Indian grocery bag or *Jhola* sold "for approximately \$48 (4,228 Indian Rupees)." (TOI Lifestyle Desk). Gucci is also accused re-branding and rendering the Kurta as an exotic artifact of capitalist desire, marketed as "floral kaftans for an exorbitant price range of £1481-2,468." (Mishra, 2021), along with twitter comments like "Gucci sweetie I will buy you this exact same kurta from Sarojini market in less than \$5" (akanshbhatt3, 2021) and "You can buy Maruti Alto or a Gucci kurta in same price!" (bekartweet, 2021). Under such circumstances, the necessity of protecting indigenous creative efforts and artisan craftsmanship/ownership become the necessary need of the hour. Despite the fool-proof existence of the GI tag which "preserves the territorial integrity of such artistic works and protects the rights of local artisans from international fashion pirates." (Singh, 2025), state-exclusive bodies such as Maharashtra's LIDCOM and Karnataka's LIDKAR, along with central bodies like NHRD and Ministry of Textiles in place, the occurrence of such incidents point towards a managerial and commercial failure. Simultaneously, ethnocentric efforts taken up by the government where local products are attempted to be made popular across localized spheres, often fails in the wake of xenocentric uproar which engages foreign couture exploitation and makes use of the ambiguous natures of third-world cultures and reframes them as exotic, appropriated fashion which can be copied without consequence. Hence, the initiation of visionary homegrown Indian brands not only target the localized lacuna of such representative platform, but also amp it up for global reach while managing protective claims over native IPs.

6.2. Policy and Managerial Synthesis

Following the Prada-Kolhapuri controversy that addressed the issue of IP protection and cultural theft, amidst which authentic Indian brands are trying to regain their identity via domestic collaborative efforts

commercialized for global platforms, it can thus be ascertained that Indian artisanship along with its judiciary and in-domicile trade relations have a long way to go. However, with regard to emerging Indian entrepreneurs, investments focused upon creative narrative rooted behind Indian cultural sensibility, brand-building crafted on the footprints of Indian authenticity and cultural ownership of the same, become the need of the hour. Hence, it remains evident via both *Gully Labs*' and *Comet*'s sneaker marketing that Indian terminologies and/or culturally rooted aesthetics, extends towards key aspects of their entrepreneurship. For instance, *Gully Labs*'s Delhi-based headquarters apart from their sneakers is itself a place to marvel upon. From "an oversized sculpture of a hand holding sneaker laces, which draws reference from Delhi airport's iconic *Mudra* installation." (Joshi & Risabh, 2025) at the entrance to its "turn into a story gallery with sketches and artworks inspired by different drops, the shoe-making process, and a customer-made art piece built entirely out of Gully Labs' shoeboxes." (Joshi & Risabh, 2025), coupled with an in-house factory and cafe. Thus remaining in-line with how co-founder Mishra defines it to be "a community floor, a custom station and a space that gives people a live *karigari* experience when they walk in," (Joshi & Risabh, 2025). *Comet*'s representation, while, criticized to be a twice removed imitation to *Nike Airforce 1*(s) and *BAPE* on various occasions (aniketd, 2025), has nonetheless built hype giving Indian sneaker consumers something to be proud of, along with the collaborations previously mentioned. Hence, *Comet*, considered to be the *Indian Nike* "is competing with these 8000 to 10000 rupees premium sneakers but giving a competitive price tag of 4300 rupees" (GrowthX, 2024), while the tag addressed in *The Vault* (*Comet*'s line-up of their collaborated sneakers) --- "Limited Quantities. Once a Month. No Restocks once Sold Out" --- manages to create a fear of missing out, boosting sales, while remaining tailor-made particularly for its community, *Cometeers*. On the other hand, *Gully Labs* demands a more *sneakerhead*/elite/collector oriented approach where home-sourced materials, including material, craftsmanship and embroidery demand a premium price of over ₹9000+ (Suhana Sethi, 2026), revoltingly marketing co-founder, Singh's claim about "being opinionated, having a personality, and sharing why we are in this journey of building yet another sneaker company. Why you can wear something that is another brand as opposed to something that you've heard for the last 30 years." (MESA School of Business, 2025).

Central and state institutions on the other hand, must revamp existing policies while inculcating a more outreaching approach, as mandated by privately owned homegrown brands. Considering the reconstruction of existing GI protection bodies into pro-active global brand agencies which could possibly connect directly to foreign trade, could push the Indian artisanship and cultural representation on a brand-new unadulterated map. Thereby, rectifying the audacity of Prada during its Milan fashion week which NDTV mentions like so --- "So think tan leather, toe rings, thin straps, but not once did Prada mention Kolhapur. Not in the show, not in the press notes, not even in passing." (NDTV, 2025). Directly funding artisan community efforts, while collaborating them with Indian lifestyle corporations and sneaker brands who could become a secondary line of defense apart from the government, identifies as a plausible measure that could curb couture theft, protect indigenous artisan rights and creations, and provide a contemporary platform for a dynamically versatile global representation.

6.3. Limitations and Directions of Future Research

This study primarily addresses the Indian urban consumer spheres and two specific footwear brands --- *Gully Labs* and *Comet*, who have come to be the leading faces of the Indian sneaker community. Future directions of this research can be done under other emerging Indian shoe companies like *Banjaaran*, *Ludic*, *Neemans*, etc. And possibly undergo the qualitative or quantitative assessment of consumers pertaining to their feedback and their will to pay. Another point of future research coverage could be dedicated to the consumer review of how they would view a said company if they were open about their imitations/inspirations, etc. and would this representation differ across other commodities.

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