

## Jeans in Kannur, Kerala: A Photo Essay

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I have just returned from spending December and January in the town of Kannur, in the north of the Indian state of Kerala. My main work there was concerned with a project being conducted by Dr Lucy Norris on the topic of waste and the decline of the handloom industry as part of the Waste of the World project. But while there I also carried out some work for the Global Denim Project. On return I decided to publish a short photo essay which can now be found at the Global Denim Project at [www.ucl.ac.uk/global-denim-project/ww](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-denim-project/ww). While it is clear that there are few prospects at present for publishing a set of colour photographs, let alone video and sound within the normal academic genres of articles and books, it seems worthwhile to complement such publications with material posted on the internet. I am sure many people are coming to the same conclusion. Along with the sociologist Don Slater I attempted this originally with the book *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* where all the illustrations were placed on an associated web site. I thought this would become a common convention, but clearly I was wrong. I have seen remarkably little use of the internet for posting the visual component of academic texts. While this blog is very helpful for giving some sense of new research, it doesn't lend itself to extensive publication of photographs and other visual materials, for which a separate website seemed more appropriate. This is what I have done using the auspices of the global denim project.

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A website allows one to give some background, for example, a sense of the range of housing, an image of the ruling Communist party and the rituals for which the area is best known; as well as more specific material about denim and other clothing. I intend to also write a paper on jeans in Kannur, but I see no reason why the visual material shouldn't remain available, since it is unlikely that any academic publication will allow for such materials to be printed.

The particular interest of Kannur, in relation to global denim, is the relatively low take up of blue jeans in South Asia. In most regions I visit jeans have reached close to 50% of everyday adult dress. But in Kannur the figure is only 5% comprising 10% male and 0% female dress. The photo essay starts to give some indication of why this remains the case, and the academic paper will explore this in much more detail. Factors include the way men, once they gain employment or fatherhood, seek to differentiate themselves, and their relative economic security, from younger males. Also the current relationship between the Muslim population, who are closely associated with fashion compared to the Hindu population, which to some extent therefore avoid certain kinds of fashion. Also the way Kannur itself is constituted as a reserve of conservatism held against the changes taking place in metropolitan India, especially with regard to females. So in at least three different but related instances jeans have become involved in a kind of sartorial politics of repudiation.

There are many other interesting features of the local context. Kerala remains governed by what was the world's first ever elected communist government. Kannur itself was previously government by Muslim rules, often a female Bibi. The area is undergoing rapid changes mainly as a result of money coming in from the Gulf. There are excellent academic publications on the region by Caroline and Filippo Osella, who give an unusual amount of attention to fashion. Incidentally we are happy to welcome new projects to the Global Denim Project. I am also starting up a news list to keep members in touch with developments. If you are interested in working on this topic with links to the overall project, please contact me at [d.miller@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:d.miller@ucl.ac.uk).