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Closing the Power Gap Through Internet Technology: The Artisan View

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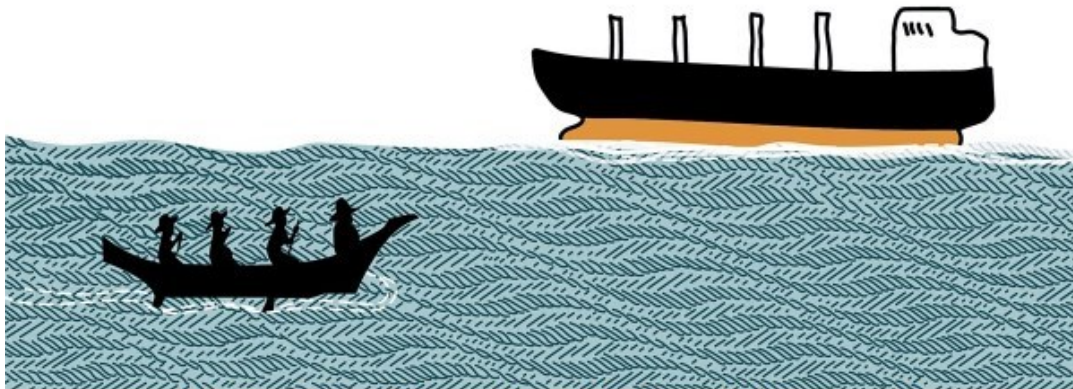*Somaiya Kala Vidya*, judyfrater@hotmail.com

The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Closing the Power Gap Through Internet Technology: The Artisan View

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In India today, artisans are considered skilled workers who can realize the concepts of designers. But traditionally craft was designed, produced and marketed by artisans. As traditional artisans aimed for new markets, designers took on the role of "interventionists" to bridge the gap in familiarity with new consumers and bring craft into contemporary markets. While this works, unfortunately demoting artisans to worker status results in minimum value for their work, little to no opportunity for creativity or recognition, and waning interest in traditions.

After many years of studying craft traditions of Kutch, and then many years working with hand embroidery artisans, I began a design education program for artisans. I felt that a new direction was needed. Artisans had designed the craft that attracted interventionists, and clearly demonstrated their ability to innovate appropriately within their own cultural context. When hand embroidery was banned among Dhebaria Rabari women, for example, they invented a whole new art form based on machine application of ready-made trims. This became a fashion trend locally and beyond.[1]

The concept of the design education program is to value traditional craft as cultural heritage, to take traditional knowledge as a pre-requisite and provide what is understood as higher or specialized education directly to artisans. The goal is to enable artisans to increase their capacity by utilizing their strength- creativity- as well as labour. Simultaneously, by bringing artisans in touch with contemporary markets and teaching them to innovate within traditions, traditions are also sustained. The intent is that through education artisans gain respect as well as income.

I received an Ashoka Fellowship to develop the curriculum. With further support from UNESCO and the Development Commissioner Handicrafts, I launched the program in 2005 as Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, in Tunda Vandh, Kutch. After eight years of directing KRV I felt that the program had reached its limitation in that venue. To build the program to an institute, I joined forces with the K.J. Somaiya Gujarat Trust to begin Somaiya Kala Vidya. Courses are taught by visiting faculty- professional design educators, in tandem with local faculty who are artisan graduates of the program.

Students of the course to date are traditional textile artisans. Within the first two years, I understood the importance of product development, and that it was not reasonable or even desirable for textile artisans to learn product design within a year. At the same time, I began to ponder the role of urban designers. Co-Design seemed a viable solution, so in 2008 we began to invite students of urban design institutes to collaborate with artisan design students in collection development, as a mutually educational experience. Thus, every graduate has experienced co-design, face-to-face in a language her or she knows.

The design course was clearly successful in increasing graduates' economic and social status. After operating it for eight years, I realized that to reap full economic benefit, business and

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[1] Janakidevi Bajaj Puraskar, "TBI Blogs: From a Village in Kutch, Pabiben Rabari Created a Global Brand to Empower Local Female Artisans," 16 February 2017.

management were also needed. So, in 2013 with an Executive-in-Residence from Western Union in partnership with Ashoka, I developed a course in Business and Management for Artisans (BMA). In April 2014, we launched the BMA as a "graduate" course for artisan design graduates. This year long course, also taught by professional educators, teaches artisans to envision and begin or expand their own businesses.

The grand finale of the course was originally planned to be an internship with an appropriate, successful designer. As the first BMA students graduated, I carefully paired them with the best, most sensitive designers working in craft. Of 12 graduates, not a single internship happened. I heard complaints from both artisan designers and urban designers about the attempts.

One Ajrakh printer, Soyab, told his internship designer- who was pregnant and working on her fashion week collection- that he was too busy. I asked him what he was busy with? He gave me a list of orders and said he was working on a new collection with his partner.

Who is your partner? I asked.
It turned out to be Prateek, the student with whom he had designed his design course final collection!
It was then that I identified the challenge.

Co-design has potential to restructure the relationship between urban designer and artisan. However, often what is called co-design is simply urban designers giving their designs to artisans to produce, with the value addition of naming the artisan who worked on the design.

The barrier to genuine co-design is the mutually perceived power imbalance. This manifests as designers assuming that artisans can't think creatively, and artisans assuming that they cannot dialogue with designers. "We don't like to work with designers," one artisan designer declared. "They tell us what to do." Another shared that he only worked with one designer after he had demanded that she stay at his home and observe the family weaving for three days. Soyab had already worked with Prateek in person, in the structured situation of our design class, on an equalized basis. So he felt comfortable collaborating with him.

A second challenge to co-design between urban and artisan designers is a difference in methodology. Urban designers prepare all specifications and then have the design produced, while artisan designers work out design specifics during sampling. So, when Dr. Jennifer Angus of University of Wisconsin Madison suggested a long-distance Co-Design project, I urged her to begin by conducting a pilot project, so that she could incorporate the experience in developing the program.

The pilot with three artisans clearly illustrated the overriding element of inter-personal rapport in collaboration. Dr. Angus was the common participant. But each partnership was unique. With Hanif, the bandhani artisan, Dr. Angus took the lead in collaboration. Hitesh, the weaver, took a stronger leadership role in his project. And with Khalid, the unique Ajrakh artisan who is more artist than artisan, he and Dr. Angus worked out designs together as Khalid experimented- the way artisans usually work.

Tulsiben shows her WhatsApp conversation with her partner

Following the pilot, Somaiya Kala Vidya and the University of Wisconsin -Madison conducted two Co-Design projects. The first was in 2016. We paired weavers, Ajrakh printers, bandhani artisans and embroiderers with UWM students, and gave them trend forecasts for inspiration. The teams used the phone app WhatsApp to collaborate in producing collections of scarves. As a member of each WhatsApp group, I guided the artisan designer participants as necessary. For example, in the first experience, overall there was some confusion because SKV teaches trend forecasts as primarily colour forecasts, which is not the case with UWM. The different ways of understanding the inspiration materials were not immediately understood.

A key point of the project was to work as equals, in addition to making fresh designs. Each team found its method of connecting. For a traditional artisan the design challenge is to innovate for the contemporary market while retaining the visual vocabulary of the craft tradition. Seeking a common design language, each artisan met challenges in communicating his or her tradition and ideas using imagery and minimal English. For the artisans English was an additional challenge. They creatively used Google Translate and the assistance of the SKV English teacher.

In some cases, the American student was not familiar with technological limitations. Pachanbhai, a handloom weaver, was baffled by his partner's layout of circles and ellipses. So he sent a chart of his traditional motifs and a video clip of himself weaving. Gaps in communication presented further challenges. When Khalil's partner did not respond to his layouts for two weeks, he went ahead and printed them on fabric and sent images, which brought momentum to their collaboration.

The second experience was more complicated. The theme chosen was "Home." This time the teams shared images of their homes, and each person created a theme board based on his or her partner's home. They could make layouts based on either or both theme boards. The colours were chosen separately from trend forecasts. The results tended to be quite abstract. At least the artisan designers tend to see images graphically rather than for their content, so they chose graphic elements for the visual inspiration.

Co-design rests on mutual respect and value. Examining the challenges artisan partners faced, how they met them, and what they learned, illustrates how they reached this balance.

Juned and Griffin:
Juned started very late on layouts. Griffin had already done sketches and computer-generated layouts to set the tone. Juned sent two sketches, Griffin incorporated the concepts, and also

asked Juned to send images of the blocks he had. Juned sent images of a handful of blocks. Then Griffin said: "I will send you the layouts and you can decide what textures, patterns and borders to use—and let me know where you want me to add patterns." Juned did two more layouts, using Griffin's ideas

Griffin made his choice of six layouts. Juned chose seven, of which two were in Griffin's list, and three were his own layouts. In the 11 short-listed. Griffin wanted Juned to choose blocks for each of them. Juned said the dark is print, the white is plain, but Griffin wanted all of the patterns to be decided, so he sent a Google doc indicating all of the patterns to be used, selected from the images Juned had sent. They selected two to produce.
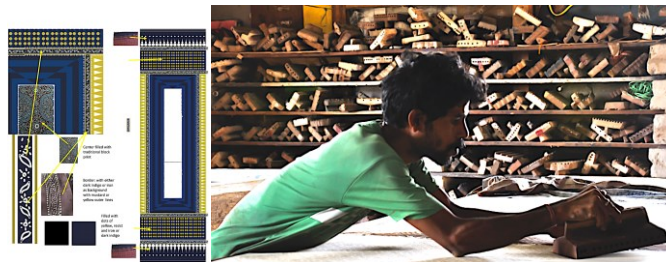
Left: Griffin's layout with directions. Right: an Ajrakh workshop with some of the many blocks

The computer renderings were very technical, leaving little room for creativity.
So Juned printed the stoles using the patterns he thought would look good. He has a workshop full of blocks, and all of the patterns are in his head. Griffin was baffled, but finally realized that working with Juned had opened him up. He had to realize that Juned was the expert in Ajrakh, he said. He had to trust his ability to work spontaneously from his vast body of knowledge.

Juned had worked with an Indian student before. In that experience they could talk face-to-face, and they had a common language. With Griffin, Juned had a language limitation. Secondly, Griffin worked on a computer. Of the two designs they selected, one Griffin's and one Juned's. Griffin's was difficult, Juned said, because of the need to measure. The small triangles had to be of a particular size and placed so that none got cut off in the design. He thought he couldn't do it, but he tried and succeeded.

In the end Juned liked Griffin's design better because he had never seen anything like it before. It did not have a pallav (end border) and there was a single border in the middle. So he got beyond the usual scarf layout.

Juned learned a lot more than he expected, he said. He learned what people in the USA like. He learned how to communicate with someone from another culture, and how to articulate his craft. Next time he is sure that he will explain better, he avows.

He also found computer aided design interesting. He realized that filling in colour, and changing colour ways would be much easier. His uncle uses Corel Draw to make block designs. So Juned extended his realm of possibilities.

Khalid and Dakota
In this collaboration, both participants may have had similar personalities, but it was not beneficial. They both needed a push to communicate and did not connect. Dakota was very slow in responding with images. Khalid was frustrated and dejected. At a mid-project meeting, the SKV group encouraged him, and showed him how to make mood boards on his phone. This prompted him to take initiative. He went home and immediately did boards on the colour stories, on Dakota's images, and on his own images, and he asked Dakota to make a mood board.

Khalid did three layouts with his photo inspirations. His style is wildly asymmetric. Dakota sent two layouts, and five days later, two more --all in a minimalist, controlled style.

Khalid did eight more layouts, incorporating Dakota's ideas. After silence, he started to choose his favorites- all his own, and he printed one and sent a video of it. Dakota made 6 layouts, which incorporated some of Khalid's ideas.
Khalid chose his final selection: four of his, four of Dakota's.

Dakota approved. Khalid produced six.

Of his experience, Khalid says, he liked the fact that Dakota had simple designs, and he felt she understood his work, but the theme was not clear. He felt that until partners meet face-to-face, they can't reach a common theme (understanding). He had the same experience the previous year. WhatsApp without knowing each other is nothing, he said. For Khalid, acquaintance is essential. With Jenny, it was easier, he said. She was there. With Jenny he learned more about concept.

What he learned from the project was the importance of mutual understanding. There has to be desire, interest, he said. Unless you get into a theme, you can't get anything out of it. And trust is necessary - especially if you can't meet in person. You have to trust each other.

Left: Zakiya and Sherly's designs. Right: Sherly wearing one of the finished stoles

Zakiya and Sherly
When Zakiya saw Sherly come swooping in late for the introductory Skype meeting, she knew she wanted to work with her. They immediately had a wonderful rapport, agreeing on colour story, use of images, fabric, etc. Zakiya explained bandhani in detail. After each made a mood board, Sherly sent a layout. Zakiya explained how colour can be used in bandhani, and made

some layouts based on her mood board- with image references. After exchanging a number of layouts, they started to worry about how to combine ideas. They made small alterations to each others' layouts. They both choose the same designs to make, and Sherly was delighted with the results.

Zakiya had the fortune to come to Wisconsin in April 2018, to present on her experiences of Co-Design, and to participate in a live Co-Design classroom project. In her public presentation, she explained what she had learned in he co-design experience. Artisans think practically, she said, so they limit themselves. They always think in terms of their technique, and in terms of marketability- as they know it. So co-design helped her transcend limitations and reach new levels.

Curiously, however, for the live co-design class Zakiya was not able to complete her part of the work. She easily created a mood board in the class and consulted face-to-face with the UWM students. But she did not make layouts. Inter-personal relations could be the factor. However, given the importance of equal status in successful co-design, perhaps the obstacle was more complex.

For artisans in India today, beginning with their perception as skilled worker status is a reality. Thus, for genuine co-design, the question is, how to find an equal level, and the understanding that Khalid clearly identifies, which is the pre-requisite for successful collaboration?

For Soyab and Khalid, face-to-face interaction, in their own environment, helped to balance collaborative relationships.

For Zakiya, however, meeting her UWM collaborators face-to-face in the USA had an inhibiting effect. In Wisconsin, she was suddenly, overwhelmingly immersed in American culture. Perhaps she did not reel the sense of equality in which she could safely share her own ideas.

In the SKV-UWM co-design project, the fact that communication was in English, meant that for the artisan designers involved, the locus of the project was the USA. For Zakiya, Juned and others, in collaborating with an American student they had not met, the distance and electronic communication had an equalizing effect that helped them communicate across differences in time, language and culture.

Co-designing with University of Wisconsin students, most of the artisan designers developed personal connections and mutual respect that gave them the opportunity to experience complex thinking, extend their capacity and appreciate their partners' capacities to solve design problems and create fresh approaches to their traditions.

The surprising contrast between Zakiya's two experiences accentuates the centrality of balance in successful co-design, and the delicacy of maintaining it.

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