

**From Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya to Somaiya Kala Vidya:
*Education as a Sustainable Future for Artisans of Kutch and Beyond***

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Tejuben Rabari embroidering, 2009

Who are artisans?

Photo Credit: Judy Frater

Indian artisans are reeling from COVID-19 and its economic repercussions. Many organizations have emerged, concerned that craft faces an existential crisis. Notably, few artisans are members of these groups. In overwhelming discussions members suggested making masks, and later initiated marketing campaigns. Recently a weaver was promoted as descending from a lineage of weavers, and today weaving a particular fiber. The campaign did not mention his design education, nor his unique designs or his artistry. The message was that he needed help, and it once again brought up fundamental questions: who are artisans? and who are craft consumers?

The Indian government has a Ministry of Textiles, and many schemes to uplift artisans. Amply funded, the schemes aim to upgrade skills to international standards. Firmly in the industrial age, India is focused on manufacturing. Meanwhile many NGOs and advocacy groups are concerned that traditional artisans are steadily leaving craft as a livelihood.

The mismatch between schemes and results arises from perception. The concept and language of the schemes indicate that craft is perceived as an antiquated, inferior form of manufacturing that could only survive if propped up with “help,” and that artisans are perceived as skilled workers.

Traditional craft in India was not industry, made in in large scale factories or production lines. In Kutch^[1], an individual or family conceived the object to be made, produced or procured the raw materials needed, and created it; it was holistic creation. Nor was craft distributed in mass. The artisan delivered his work to users directly. Each artisan family had its own clientele, and there were often hereditary, personal relationships between makers and users. Traditionally craft was made in a community-based horizontal social structure, in which artisans all held more or less equal economic and social status.

In the 1950s as India began nation building focused on rapid industrialization, and traditional clients began to prefer mass produced goods over hand craft, artisans looked to more distant, unknown markets. With industrialization, came the concept of design as an entity. Designers were encouraged to intervene in commercializing craft, using an industrial model in which the assumed goals are to manufacture faster, cheaper and in a more standardized way.

In Indian languages there is no word for design as a process separate from creation. The introduction of design, as “intervention,” began a process of separating concept and execution, resulting in the perception of artisan as worker. “Intervention” further comes with an implication of power and hierarchy: that designers have valuable knowledge, while artisans have less valuable skills. Relegating artisans to worker status results in minimizing value for their work, little to no opportunity for creativity or recognition and, finally, waning interest in craft, particularly among the next generation. Artisans leave craft today because from their perspective, it does not generate enough income, nor enough respect for the effort that it requires.

Education for Artisans

After many years of studying craft traditions of Kutch, and then many years working with hand embroiderers, I began a design education program for artisans. I felt that a new direction was

needed. Crafts were appreciated enough to commercialize them, and yet the process used was "intervention." Artisans had designed the craft that attracted interventionists, and clearly demonstrated their ability to innovate appropriately within their own cultural context.[\[2\]](#)

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. By learning to innovate within traditions and connecting with contemporary markets, artisans can utilize their strength- creativity- to increase their capacity. Simultaneously, it is artisans who can ensure integrity in their cultural heritage, and traditions are genuinely sustained. The intent is that artisans gain respect as well as income through education.

I received an Ashoka Fellowship to develop the program. With further support from UNESCO and the Development Commissioner Handicrafts, I launched it in 2005 as Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya (KRV), in Tunda Vandh, Kutch. After eight years of directing KRV I felt that the program had reached its limitation in that venue. To build it to an institute, I joined forces with the K.J. Somaiya Gujarat Trust to begin Somaiya Kala Vidya.



The SKV master artisan Advisors, Ismail Mohmad Khatri, Shamji Vishramji Siju, Alimamad Isha Khatri, Umar Faruk Khatri, and Gulam Husen Umar Khatri discuss traditions with the SKV class of 2019. Master artisan advisors guided the development of the design education program and monitor its impact. Each year, they teach students to examine traditions with students, reinventing the way children once learned from elders. Photo Credit: Judy Frater

To ensure relevance and success, I enlisted guidance from respected master artisan advisors. We drew from key aspects of traditional learning systems and an understanding of artisan lifestyles so that artisans could attend and benefit from the course. The design course we developed comprises six two-week courses spread over a year: Colour; Basic Design; Market Orientation; Concept, Communication, Projects; Collection Development, Finishing; and Merchandising, Presentation. The course teaches artisans to appreciate their traditions, and to recognize aspects that make them unique.



Bishakha Shome teaches Nitesh

Namori Siju colour on the loom, 2010.

Teaching methods are experiential. Students learn to immediately apply theory to their craft media.

Photo Credit: Judy Frater

Then it teaches them to innovate. The strengths of the course are local orientation, and sustained input.^[3] Classes are conducted in local language and draw from local traditions. Schedules accommodate cultural practices. Visiting faculty - professional design educators, in tandem with local faculty who are artisan graduates of the program teach the courses, using hands-on practical methods as much as possible. Students and faculty live together, interacting intensively for the two weeks. Between courses, the local faculty members visit students in their homes to ensure that they have understood course material and can implement it in practical homework assignments. The year-long duration of the course ensures that students absorb, retain and use what is taught.



SKV alumnus Taraben Puvar models a ready to wear sari from the collection of Shokat Ayub Khatri, SKV class of

2018.

Design students draw from tradition to create contemporary products. Each one's vision is unique.

Photo Credit: Ketan Harshad Pomal, L.M. Studio

They learn to look beyond technique to using technique in visual language, and to find their own unique interpretations drawn from common traditions. Among 197 design graduates, there has been virtually no duplication.



Moinuddin Haroon Rashid Khatri, Class of 2019, presents his year of design education to family and alumni. Family often give feedback very different from that of the final professional jury; to sustain tradition, both perspectives are important.

Photo Credit: Judy Frater

In a conscious effort to build an alumni community and ensure support from the greater artisan community, I included an alumni jury at the end of each course, and a family jury after the sixth course. Finally, students present to a jury comprising design and craft professionals.



Rajesh Vishramji Siju presents for his Business and Management for Artisans jury, 2016.

In the post-graduate Business and Management for Artisans course, Artisan Designers learn to maximize their creative work through management.

Photo Credit: Ketan Harshad Pomal, L.M. Studio

After directing the design course for eight years, I realized that to reap full economic benefit, business and management were also needed. So in 2013 with an Executive- in- Residence from Western Union in partnership with Ashoka, I developed a post-graduate course in Business and Management for Artisans (BMA). Also modular and practice-based, the course is nonetheless more left-brained. For artisans, it is more demanding, but very rewarding. Students learn the importance of ownership, responsibility and ethics.



Tosif M. Yusuf Khatri shows his contemporary Ajrakh to a customer at Bougainvillea Gallery, Ahmedabad 2019.

*Design and BMA courses include real-time exhibitions of final collections, for market feedback on their collections.
Photo Credit: Judy Frater*

Both courses end in public events. Each graduation program held in Kutch includes a professional fashion show, drawing thousands of enthusiastic viewers, and compelling them to value craft and artisans in other ways. BMA students plan and implement exhibition/ sales in higher-end urban venues, immediately confirming increased value.



SKV Artisan Designers present their collections at Lakme Fashion Week, 2017. They were among the first artisans to be recognized as designers in their own right. Photo Credit: Lakme Fashion Week

Impact to Date

Almost fifteen years of design education have clearly demonstrated success in connecting graduate artisans to new markets and increasing their incomes.^[4] When individuals express their ideas, traditions diversify- and the market actually expands. As one small-scale artisan noted, "My income has increased ten times, while the long-time major producer's income has not suffered at all. It is a win-win situation!" Graduates have won the Indian President's and World Crafts Council awards. Three graduates' work was exhibited in the contemporary design section of the Victoria and Albert Museum's major exhibition "The Fabric of India." In 2017, seven graduates were the first artisans to be recognized as designers on the national Lakme Fashion Week ramp. Thirteen design graduates and two advisors have participated in the International Folk Art Market| Santa Fe.

In effect, the design course re-imagines traditional systems in an appropriate contemporary form. Master artisan advisors teach students about traditions, as children once learned from elders; teaching weavers, printers and dyers together revitalizes the interdependence of weavers and dyers in producing traditional textiles; and enabling direct interface between artisan designers and urban markets reinvents the system of direct contact with hereditary clients. Most important, education has shaped understanding, attitudes and values. As Ismailbhai, Ajrakh Advisor, explains, “Earlier we knew so many things, but we never reflected upon them. Now this education has helped us understand the rationales behind doing what our ancestors were doing.” Purshotambhai, weaver, design and BMA graduate states, “My father did not allow us to be weavers; there is not enough income, he said. So, I studied, then worked with an NGO for twelve years. Then I took the design course. I learned design; I could create designs with my eyes closed. But I also got confidence. This course gives us confidence to desire progress.” Aslambhai, Ajrakh printer, design and BMA graduate affirms, “My father and I were doing job work --we would print on someone else’s fabric. When I saw design graduates’ new products, I also felt the urge to create. I completed the design course and had a business but no market. SKV’s BMA course was a perfect opportunity. Most important, we learned that we shouldn’t copy. We must create designs and an identity for ourselves.” Irfanbhai, Ajrakh printer, design graduate and Governing Council member states, “The one-year design course brought many changes in the way we work and made creating new designs easy. Now we don’t have to look for new customers; they come looking for us. Many of us work with established brands and have to accept their terms and conditions. Similarly, we artisans should draft terms and conditions for these brands to accept.”



Dilip Dayabhai Kudecha walks the SKV Kala Umang ramp with his collection, 2017.

*Young artisans of Kutch are choosing craft traditions as an excellent choice, rather than a last resort.
Photo Credit: Ketan Harshad Pomal, L.M. Studio*

Perhaps the most significant success is children of artisans in Kutch returning to craft. Dayabhai, weaver, design and BMA graduate, and SKV faculty relates, “I asked my son Dilip to study further, and he said, ‘What will I do after graduation? I will get a job where only my office staff or my boss will know me, and however much I work I will get a limited salary. It is better to be educated in the craft sector, because the whole world will know me and I will get maximum return from my inputs.’”^[5]



Pachan Premji Siju mentors Shantaben in an Outreach program at Avani Kumaon, 2018.

“In teaching, we learn.”

Photo Credit: LOKesh Ghai

Outreach

In 2014, when the design education program was reaching its goals of increasing income and respect for graduates in Kutch, we began outreach work to test the approach in other regions. Because cultural heritage is central to the goal of innovating within tradition, we envisioned scaling out with regional programs rather than scaling up to a larger institute in Kutch. The pilot project was in Bagalkot, Karnataka. With the inspiration of Jentibhai, a Kutch weaver graduate, we used an Artisan-to-Artisan approach: weaver design graduates mentored Bagalkot weavers. We intended that partner artisans would quickly reach better markets, realize that design makes a difference, and be motivated to take a version of the design course.

Dayabhai, a pilot mentor relates the experience, “Teaching artisans is the responsibility of an artisan, because artisans share a language and trust each other. There were initially many barriers, language, their thinking...before teaching anything we must address what students want to do and what we are going to teach. If we clearly communicate, we get faster results. The Bagalkot weavers couldn’t believe that their cotton saris would sell for such prices. And they

couldn't believe that the saris they made would be appreciated. But when they sold their products themselves in Mumbai, their joy was amazing. I enjoyed shaping this initiative of artisans helping fellow artisans.”^[6]

Over two years we conducted a condensed design course tailored specifically to the weavers in Bagalkot, in Kannada language, focused on innovation within the Ilkal sari weaving tradition. The participants dramatically transformed from indentured job workers to independent entrepreneurs in just three years. Subsequently we conducted similar projects with embroiderers in Lucknow and weavers in Kumaon.

The Evolution of Artisan Designers

Because commercialization of craft has been based on an industrial model, the assumption is that craft must scale up to succeed. But when craft is pushed into the world of industrialized production, the structure of artisan societies inevitably changes from horizontal to vertical. Economically stronger individuals become “Master Artisans,” employ previously equal status artisans as workers, and gain higher social as well as economic status. The perception of the artisan as worker is thus reinforced in a new, socially threatening form.

A key goal of our educational programs is to encourage individuality as an alternative path to success. And as the number of artisan design graduates in the circumscribed Kutch region grew, a new genre of artisan emerged: the Artisan Designer. These graduates differ from artisans and urban designers, in that they both design and produce. Today there is a community of Artisan Designers, with new outlooks.

Changing Goals and Perspectives

Artisan Designers understand that craft is more than a livelihood. Today they have choices in means of earning. They clearly work for satisfaction as well as income and understand that there are multiple measures of success. When we asked a group of weaver graduates if they considered themselves successful, nearly all of them answered yes. Probed further, they detailed their definition of success. “We confidently know good design, we now have our own concepts and identity, we know how to take feedback, we can talk to our customers. Success is having a voice,” they said. “It is using your creativity, decision making power, achieving goals, and taking responsibility.”^[7]

Strikingly, not one Artisan Designer defined success in terms of money. “My early goal was money,” Dayabhai explained. “I wanted to educate my children. Now, it is to be my own person. My elder son told me not to weave. Now people from all over the world come to my house, so I have value. It's not about just money. Asked if their goals had changed because of design and business education, Prakashbhai laughed. “Before the course, we had no goals!” he said.

“Previously there were no choices,” Dayabhai concluded. “Now, weavers who continue their tradition do so by choice. With design education we learned to create products appropriate to the market. That facilitated financial growth. Now we can share our experience with the next generation and think of the benefit to our community.”^[8]

During a 2020 SKV admission interview when elders criticized a young weaver for his contemporary streetwear, he replied with the accumulated confidence of the Artisan Designer community, “I am a weaver by heart, not by dress.”

Approaching a Creative Crafts Culture- Education and the Market

Craft is created as part of an ecosystem. The visionary cultural economist Arjo Klamer describes an ideal “Creative Crafts Culture.” On the supply side of this value-based economy, he details what remarkably resembles the Artisan Designer community of Kutch and Karnataka. ^[9]

For Artisan Designers, the demand side of a Creative Crafts Culture must still be developed. In Kutch, craft was traditionally exchanged in a barter system. Weavers, printers and dyers gave fabrics to herders and farmers, and in turn received milk, goats and grain. When asked how they insured that goods exchanged were equal in value, Irfanbhai said simply, “We didn’t.” People received what they needed when they needed it. The shift in conception between this traditional valuation system and the commercial market is enormous.

Artisan Designers have found clientele through the plethora of direct sale / pop-up shows in Indian urban centers. Most are active on social media and many sell directly through Facebook, Instagram and online shops. But this market sees hand work as primarily an inferior form of manufacturing and expects it to be a bargain. The question now is, how to re-imagine the traditional community-based economy to develop robust, widely accessible domestic markets that value diverse, smaller scale, artisan-designed creation.



Dayal Atmaram Kudecha talks to a customer at the International Folk Art Market | Santa Fe, 2015.

Cultivating the consumer for a Creative Crafts Culture, and ensuring the integrity of education are the next frontiers.

Photo Credit: Judy Frater

The Craft Consumer and the Human Connection

This task begins with the essence of craft, and the craft consumer. Craft is the creation of the human hand guided by the human spirit. It is slow, labour intensive, limited in production and full of character. Craft is the expression of cultural heritage. Traditionally, it uses natural materials with ecologically sound practices. These characteristics are all diametrically opposed to large-scale production.[\[10\]](#) People who consume craft do not care about mass production. They choose craft because of its meaning and human connection.

Crafts Council of England studies in 2010 and 2020 illuminate what craft consumers want: cultural consumption. Craft buyers of UK seek authenticity, experiences, and ethical and sustainable consumption. The 2010 study showed that craft buyers consider craft a new way of signaling connoisseurship.[\[11\]](#) The 2020 study indicated that they are increasingly maker-focused.[\[12\]](#) In short, scaling up hand craft production will not likely meet the needs of these consumers.

The phenomenal success of the International Folk Art Market| Santa Fe offers further insight into western craft consumers. Craft can be purchased locally across the USA, or online. Yet for sixteen years, people have flocked to this weekend event. A key feature of the Market is that artisans are present to sell their work. We may surmise that the huge response illustrates a value for the human connection of craft. This has not yet dominated craft buying in India. To cultivate appropriate valuation, education for consumers as well artisans is needed.

Education in the Time of COVID-19

As the world deals with social disconnection and economic crisis, much of scaled up craft production is disrupted, and the direct sale venues that are the mainstay of artisan markets are suspended.

Rather than think of artisans manufacturing masks can we instead see this as an opportunity for a radical shift to re-valuing craft? Education has enabled many artisan designers to creatively utilize the pause. Prakashbhai shared that many weaver designers had limited raw materials during lockdown, so they strategized and produced masterpieces using more workmanship that would earn more value when markets reopened. Shakilbhai used lockdown time to develop the line of natural dyed batiks of which he had long dreamed. And many artisan designers turned their creativity to enhancing online presentation skills.

“Small artisans don’t get a good response to direct sales by Instagram and Facebook because they can’t create good visuals,” Prakashbhai observes. “If they can learn this type of marketing, they can get better value and a better response. This way they can become known in the market.”

In the age of COVID-19, online education is emerging as a reality. “Online education could be good or not,” Ismailbhai says. “It’s not like practical and does not have the essential environment. However, we have to figure out how to use it.”[\[13\]](#)

Like tradition, education must evolve to express and address the changing contemporary world. While subjects can now expand to include virtual communication, our education program, honouring the essence of craft traditions and drawing from traditional learning systems, must retain personal connection to be effective. As Ismailbhai says, we have to figure out how.

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Endnotes

[1] a desert region in western India on which this article is based

[2] "This is Ours,' Rabari Tradition and Identity in a Changing World," Nomadic Peoples (Koln) Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2002

[3] Chatterjee, Ashoke, Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya: An Evaluation Report, June 2007.

[4] In-house surveys conducted with graduates of Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya and Somaiya Kala Vidya.

[5] Quotes taken from the transcription of the seminar "Craft Nouveau: A Decade of Education for Artisans," held by Craft Revival Trust at India International Center, Delhi, 30 November 2016.

[6] *ibid*

[7] Quoted from a meeting held with Bhujodi weaver design gradates 20 February 2018.

[8] *ibid*

[9] Klamer, Arjo, et al. "Crafting Culture: The importance of craftsmanship for the world of the arts and the economy at large," Erasmus University, June 2012.

[10] Frater, J. "Valuing the Unique: Craft Traditions in the Contemporary Market," keynote address for the International Textile and Apparel Association Annual Conference, November 2015.

[11] McIntyre, M. H., "Consuming Craft: The Contemporary Craft in a Changing Economy," Crafts Council England, 2010.

[12] McIntyre, M.H., "The Market for Craft," Commissioned by the Crafts Council of England and Partners, 2020

[13] Quoted from Zoom interviews on education, August 2020