

Traditional Learning in Textile Artisan Communities of Kutch

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Interviews with Dr. Ismail Mohmed Khatri, Umar Faruk Khatri, Vishramji Valji Siju, Naran Mandan Siju, Lachhuben Raja Rabari, Shamji Vishramji Siju, Irfan Anwar Khatri, Prakash Naran Siju, and Mukhtar Jakriya Khatri compiled by Judy Frater

How did you learn embroidery? I asked a Dhebaria Rabari woman.

“I didn’t learn it,” she corrected me. “I knew it.” It was a succinct and profound assessment of the distinction between traditional ways of learning and formal education.



*Lachhuben teaches her daughter Rami embroidery, c. 1994
Among Rabaris, embroidery is passed from mother to daughter.
Photo Credit: Judy Frater*

Lachhuben Raja, a 65-year-old Kachhi Rabari woman, recalls how when she was fifteen or sixteen she learned embroidery. She and her friends would sit together and stitch. She never went to school. But the girls worked as if in a class, intent on mastering the unique Rabari style.

On small scraps of fabric, she first learned tight square chain stitch, then setting mirrors- round first, then shapes. At this point, her mother helped; since she knew the traditional patterns, she stitched the outlining.

Filling in the traditional motifs, Lachhuben internalized, them, as well as the characteristic colour patterning. Then, she learned outlining. That is the key, the foundation of embroidery, she says. When the girls had grasped the basic stitches, they learned the repertoire of accent stitches. The combination of stitch, colour, pattern and motif defines Rabari style.



Ismailbhai's grandson Naim plays with block printing in the workshop, 2014. Supervision isn't needed. Children observe and experiment. Photo Credit: Judy Frater

Ismailbhai Mohmed Khatri, who is 60, went to the local school in Dhamadka. He started learning Ajrakh printing and bandhani while in school. After class and during vacations he would help his father out. He first did washing and drying, and then learned the easy prints, large sized

fillers such as phuladi in malir. He ruined a lot of fabric, he laughs, so that's why children started with things that didn't matter so much.

When his hand was good, he started learning rekh/ outlining, which is harder, and then he was able to do more important work. There weren't so many orders then, he recalls, but at wedding time when traditional clients ordered more work he would help with that. By the time he was 13 or 14 he had learned Ajrakh.

No one really taught him as such, he says. "You learn by watching and practice." He would observe, try, and if he had trouble, observe more closely or ask someone. It could be anyone who was there, father, uncle. If you asked someone more than once, perhaps he would tell you the trick.

"Every skill has a trick," he says. "You have to learn that to get good. In printing, you need to learn to register early on or you get into bad habits. You learn step by step." He learned from his environment, he emphasizes. To say you learned on your own is arrogance. Nor do you learn from someone.



Irfanbhai's son Arkam plays with block printing in the workshop, 2019.

"It is the way you learn language."

Photo Credit: Judy Frater

Irfanbhai Anwar Khatri, 38, also an Ajrakh artist who grew up in Dhamadka, agrees. “Traditionally the main thing was watching and absorbing,” he says. “Learning at home in the traditional way, from childhood, there is not much need for teaching. It is the way you learn language; it’s in your blood.”

He began learning Ajrakh when he was 9 or 10. When he was in school, he would work in off hours and during vacations, printing on waste fabric. Like Ismailbhai, he started with datlo, the filling blocks. The guideline is already there and there is some leeway; mistakes are not as visible. When he had learned how to register, he learned rekh/outline. He started with discrete motifs that need placement. There is leeway there too; with joined blocks mistakes show more. And on a small piece you don’t see imperfections so much. On a larger piece, by the time you get to the end, the mistake is multiplied.

When he worked on an actual piece, his father or uncle would do a few impressions and show him, then let him take it forward. And when the piece was done, they would do a review. Then they would give him another piece.

By the time he was 15 he had learned printing. He learned dyeing after leaving school. Observing, he had some idea. When his father would go out for a few days, he would give Irfanbhai assignments: he told him proportions, and Irfanbhai had to do the rest.

“In traditional work, people learn automatically,” notes Vishramjibhai Valji Siju, a weaver aged 75 from Bhujodi. Traditionally, when a boy was 15 he started weaving seriously. On the traditional *mohurat*[\[1\]](#), he would be given his own loom with the blessings of Ganesh. Most boys would be able to work professionally with 6 months of practice.

Shamjibhai, Vishramjibhai’s son, is 45. He concurs that he didn’t actually need to formally learn. “I sat with my father while he worked,” he says. “There is a time period in which it is easy to learn. It is a time of experiencing materials. Children learn by playing, watching and listening. It also depends on environment. When I was a child all of the weaving was done at home. There were no phones, TVs etc. We had no other options, so our attention was on weaving.”

Naranbhai Mandan Siju, a weaver from Bhujodi, aged 55, similarly grew up in a home in which his father, elder brother and everyone in the neighborhood wove. He watched and sat with his father. Traditionally weavers’ children make toy looms and learn on them, Naranbhai says; and when their work is needed, they can weave. He liked playing more than school. Coupled with that, the family was struggling financially. Around 1980 when he was almost finished 10th grade his mother told him sternly that he had to help, so he asked his father to teach him. They sat together for a week during vacation and he learned all of the patterns and motifs. He already knew weaving from watching, he says. But you need to work practically.

His son Prakashbhai, 30, learned in a similar way. He observed his father weaving, played with a toy loom and leftover yarn, and when a loom was free, he would weave plain weave. When he was 16 or so, he began weaving more seriously. His father gave him feedback. If the quality

was too loose, he would take it out and do it again. When he knew plain weaving, his father taught him extra weft patterning.

While the late Umarbhai Faruk Khatri, a bandhani artist who was aged 66 at the time of the interview, was in school in Bhadli village, his family was doing bandhani. In bandhani men and women each do different work, so you learn from both parents, he said. While studying, he learned from his father to print the patterns on cloth, and from his mother he learned tying. His mother did not let him play; he had to learn. He worked on small pieces of fabric and she taught him. Umarbhai was naughty and fought with the teachers at school. Besides that, his father was not well. So he left school in 6th grade to help with the family business. At 12 he got tired, so he worked for a few hours a day. He started by washing and stirring the vats of dye. His father was strict. He would give him a woolen piece and tell him to dye it. When he ruined the fabric, his father hit him. Umarbhai understood that he had to learn. So he concentrated and became good at dyeing. Then his father taught him the finer points.

Mukhtarbhai Jakriya Khatri, 29, relates that when he was growing up, there were two ways of teaching children their traditional craft: teach them yourselves or send them to someone else- a family member- to learn. His observation is that children often learn better from someone other than a parent. He learned acid dyeing for silk at home. When he wanted to learn dyeing for cotton, he went to other workshops to learn vat and naphthol technology. Then he wanted to learn salesmanship, so after that he worked in a shop.

“Children learn in response to need,” Ismailbhai says. “And they learn when they want to learn. When you feel stumped, you are hungry and ready to learn. And it takes time.” Though his father did not make a point of teaching, he would sometimes explain things to his sons. Sometimes they got it; often they did not understand the first time. “Knowledge needs to sink in. But if you aren’t interested, you will never learn,” he says.

Naranbhai, who specializes in carpets, had the opportunity to teach weavers carpet weaving. Some caught on well. Others did not. One artisan wove 13 carpets, he recalls. For each, he showed him how to improve. But the student was unwilling to hear. Naranbhai rejected his work. Even then, he did not learn. What Naranbhai learned was the centrality of interest. “Each artisan’s hand is different,” he says. “But involvement and application are essential. To do good work, you have to think about your work all of the time. You have to immerse yourself in it. You need patience and focus.”

Understanding quality is fundamental to craft. “Quality has many aspects, and young weavers also learn that by watching,” Shamjibhai says. His father would tell him how the selvedge should be, and what looked good in design- he would give feedback.

“Traditional pieces had specific requirements,” Vishramjibhai explains. “The clients wanted them in the way they had always been made. There was no question of innovation. The way we could distinguish ourselves was through quality. Traditional clients appreciated excellent quality. It was they who judged.”

Traditionally, clients were local, Irfanbhai agrees. “We met them in person and saw or heard what they liked. My grandfather used to take the products to the clients’ villages and learned from them. Designs were fixed but we varied them a bit. We knew our clients and made what they wanted, what they used.”

“The client is our laboratory,” Ismailbhai says. “Traditional clients wanted rich, saturated colours. But colour is not just about hue. It is also about how it wears, the life of the fabric. -- And in turn we learn about our clients,” he laughs. “We need to learn to evaluate the honesty of people’s feedback.”

With the exception of Lachhuben, all of the artisans experienced formal as well as traditional education. “There is a lot of difference between learning craft and learning in school,” Shamjibhai says. “School is only education- meaning book learning. At home there is education plus knowledge- of how to live. Craft is life. The way I learned cannot be explained in just in one word.”

School is different, Umarbhai agreed. Although in his words, in school you get “knowledge.”

Ismailbhai describes the difference as, “In school, teachers teach. At home, children learn by doing, by watching and asking. They get ideas, experiment and learn.”

Reflecting on the difference between learning craft and learning at school Mukhtarbhai says, “The atmosphere and scheduling at home and school were different. Other than math- and maybe discipline, school was not useful. At school the focus was to learn to be capable and advance toward a job. At home, too, they said children would have better opportunities in a job. They did not see much future in craft.”

Naranbhai concurs that when he went to school a generation earlier, the focus was on preparation for a job, and the expectation was that a student would have to study further, maybe even to college. He was not able to think of going far enough for a job.

Years ago, at a Dastkar bazaar I was happy to meet a weaver from Bhujodi with his son. He responded, “Well, he didn’t pass 10th grade; what else could he do?” Vishramjibhai, a generation older than Naranbhai, says, “Our people are not equipped for government jobs, so they weave.”

The 1960s marked a drastic change throughout artisan communities of Kutch. In the 1950s India had focused on rapid industrialization as a key to nation building. With inflation and the influx of cheaper industrially produced products, traditional clients began to prefer synthetics and mill made fabrics to hand craft. Seeking alternative clients, artisans looked to more distant, unknown markets.

By 1954-55 weavers of Bhujodi had started to work commercially. They wove khadi yardage, and products for the Gujarat State Handloom and Handicraft Department. Naranbhai’s father had experimented with shawls and was weaving for the Bhujodi cooperative society. Naranbhai learned weaving with shawls. He tried to do his own marketing, but his quality was better than average and he only had contacts with local merchants, so he had to take a loss in price.

“In 1965 Prabhaben Shah, a designer from Mumbai, came to Kutch,” Vishramjibhai recalls. “It was she who thought of converting the woolen *odhani* to a shawl and taking it to market in Mumbai. We made a sample with a Khatri bandhani artist in Bhadli. That was the *mohurat* for weavers.

Umarbhai was the Bhadli artist. He had tried his own bandhani shawl designs, haphazardly, he says. Then he learned design from Prabhaben. They worked together. She would stay in Bhadli for days at a time.

Prabhaben also introduced flat weave carpets to Bhujodi. It was not a difficult transition because her designs were derived from traditional products. In 1984 Vishramjibhai gave Naranbhai an order and he started weaving carpets.

Ismailbhai says he learned to innovate by chance and by experimentation. For example, if he made a mistake carving a block and it looked good--it was a new design. Sometimes artisans tried deliberately to make innovations that looked good but entailed less work. He learned more directed innovation from entrepreneur Jenny Housego, who asked him to find ways to realize her designs.

Irfanbhai started thinking about aesthetics from an early age. When he was six or so, his father printed fabrics for Gurjari using large blocks for production. Irfanbhai used old small blocks to learn, and he learned to appreciate their quality. He was interested, so on his own he later printed fabrics for his sisters’ dresses. People gave him positive feedback. When designers started to come, he got ideas from them, which encouraged him further.

“We have innovated over time,” he says. “In printing skills there are also ideas. Background and printing colours affect each other. So you have to make colours accordingly. You also have to keep in mind the effect of fabric. Today we are still learning in printing.”

As clients began to come to Vishramjibhai, Shamjibhai would listen to discussions. His father would discuss innovations with the family, emphasizing that designs need to last. Shamjibhai would show new designs to his father and elders for feedback.

For years, Naranbhai wove carpets in just a few design variations for Vishramjibhai. In 2006 he started his own business and Prakashbhai joined him. From 2007 they began working with a Finnish client who was very specific about the quality she wanted. Naranbhai adjusted his weaving to fit her need, and as the quality was superior, they made this their family standard. “Involvement in our own work taught us that if you do good work, you should use good materials,” he says.

Prakashbhai agrees, and adds that the interest factor applies to an artisan’s relationship to his work. Commercialized production brought social changes within artisan communities. Artisans who had the means to successfully manage distant clients hired others to work for them, outsourcing they call ‘job work.’ For his own work, Prakashbhai observes, a weaver will do extraordinary quality, but in job work the quality will be less.

In his childhood, Mukhtarbai's family did bandhani job work, dyeing for other artisans. They were not invested in it, he says. They just had to produce what was given to them. They were afraid to suggest changes. They did not apply whatever they knew.

Until the 1960s Rabari women had never embroidered for consumers besides themselves and their family. But with inflation they needed to earn to supplement the family income from milk, wool and animals. When they began commercial embroidery, they clearly distinguished it from their traditional work.

“What we do for ourselves is art,” Lachhuben says. “It was always art. There was no question of time or money. And our work always had to do with imagination as much as stitching.” Traditionally, each piece was an innovation.

In commercial work, they filled in printed patterns. The focus was on time and money. Women learned to cut corners. They did not initially carry these habits to traditional work, but tradition was nonetheless impacted simply because women had less time for their own embroidery. They responded with creative innovations: Kachhi Rabaris combined machine and hand embroidery, and Dhebaria Rabaris- due to community prohibition of hand work- invented a new art form of machine applied ribbons and trims. The focus of community valuation of embroidery shifted from technical excellence to innovation. Fashion became the new tradition, and finally all but eliminated traditional hand embroidery.

Clearly, artisans traditionally learned deeply and comprehensively, in ways that enabled them to not only produce excellent work but also to innovate for new circumstances.

Ismailbai feels that in today's world artisans need to learn new skills. They always used multiple skills, he says, but today it is much more than just printing patterned cloth. Now that they work in fashion, they are learning many new aspects of colour and design. Today's artisans also need to learn photography, accounting, GST, organizing, information retrieval, management and marketing.

Shamjibhai agrees. “Education is essential for production, marketing, knowing how to deal with customers, and knowing what will be demanded. To work now and into the future, you need education.”



Irfanbhai's son Arkam learns washing along with a workshop participant 2019. Adults who come to learn craft need teachers. Meanwhile, Arkam learns in the traditional way. Photo Credit: Judy Frater

“Learning as an adult is different,” Irfanbhai says. “If we want to learn English, for example, we have to take a different route. You need teachers if you learn as an older person. You don’t learn from a teacher the way you learn as a child because you don’t have the environment. You will never catch the subject as well. But we need studies as well as experience.”

Prakashbhai shares that in school he was introduced to areas beyond his home experience. He learned a bit of English, for example, and it sparked an interest. He continued to learn and now English is useful to him. He was introduced to natural dyes in 7th grade. That triggered an interest too. Today he is proficient in a wide range of natural dyes. He was fortunate, he says. “Schools in India are generally focused on a particular career. They don’t usually include practical elements.”

Then he confesses that he actually was not that interested in his tradition. Like his father, he was compelled to help with the family business. But he studied design at Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya and gained interest in his tradition there. “That is what is needed in school,” he says.



School children learn weaving on toy looms, taught by Shamjibhai and Vishramjibhai, 2019. Today, traditional learning is shared with children in schools, to sensitize them to craft. Photo Credit: Shamji Vishramji Siju

[\[1\]](#) auspicious time for an enterprise to begin