

BUILDING FUTURES: LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE CASE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP IN KUTUH, INDIA

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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic that spread rapidly across the globe, a tough nationwide lockdown was initiated across India on 23 March 2020.² Announced and implemented on the same day, the total shutting down of the economy allowed no time for planning. This enforced a closure of all educational institutions, trade and business and public life, along with a halt on all transport and delivery systems. With a suspension of road, air, and rail transport services, the country witnessed an exodus of millions of internal migrant workers who, having lost their jobs and incomes overnight, walked back home to their villages and hometowns. Among the many were those from the artisanal sector who lost jobs and livelihoods.³

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP IN INDIA

India's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of traditional craftsmanship represents a huge skill base and a vast diversity of cultural and craft traditions, these traditions which are dynamic and continue to evolve symbolise the everyday lives and worldviews of communities practicing them. Many crafts in India are intrinsically linked to cultural practices such as festivals, rituals and ceremonies.

Apart from their cultural significance, the handicrafts and handlooms form a significant economic sector in India engaging an estimated range of 11 to 200 million plus artisans and allied workers. While crafts are produced for home and extended personal networks they are also based on professional relationships whereby crafts are produced for trade and for consumption by local and distant customers. With a sizeable women and rural based population, a majority of artisans belong to communities that are socio-economically disadvantaged. With about 67 percent of handloom households earning less than Rs. 5,000 (USD 60)

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² First identified in December 2019 in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, this highly contagious infectious disease causing severe health issues was labelled a pandemic on 11 March 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO). One of the measures to stem its spread that was adopted by countries across the world was in the form of lockdown.

³ The lockdown in India continued till May 31, 2020.

per month.⁴

TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP AND COVID-19

Artisans across different regions in India were dealt with severe challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, facing no-work situations and loss of income impacting their ability to meet their daily survival needs. For many, the precariousness of craft based practices and livelihoods increased several folds as practitioners being mostly self-employed or work on wage basis are without adequate financial or health benefit support. Their vulnerability was enhanced as receiving formal credit through banks is a huge challenge for artisans and they are often indebted to private moneylenders who charge high rates of interest. About 30 percent of artisans surveyed for COVID-19 impact reported 'approaching moneylenders for loans even at high interest rates' as a coping mechanism during COVID-19.⁵

GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE OF CASE-STUDY

While anecdotal examples of distress, survival, resilience, innovation, and rejuvenation have emerged from across the domains of traditional craftsmanship, data remains limited across India. The case study to assess the impact of COVID-19 attempts to remedy this with field research concentrated on the Kutch region in Gujarat, India.

A geographically distinctive region, Kutch is located on the western tip of India, the region is bounded by the Arabian Sea on one side, the Rann of Kutch - a salt desert on the other, with vast expanses of grasslands. With its vibrant intangible cultural traditions practicing diverse cultural and craft traditions Kutch has over twenty distinctive crafts practised by specialist communities that inhabit this region. These practices include handloom cotton and wool weaving, *dhurrie*/ floor-covering weaving, block-printing, batik, *Bandhini*/tie-dye on textiles, wide varieties of embroidery, pottery, leather craft, metal bell-making, lacquer wood, wood carving and others. The craft practitioners belong to various specialised communities that inhabit this region. It is a cultural mosaic with a diverse mix of influences due to migrations from Sindh (now in Pakistan) and Rajasthan. While crafts in Kutch are an integral part of the cultural identity and social life of communities, they also contribute significantly to artisanal income generation. Kutch has also been the ground for various successful initiatives in the past such as the revival and promotion of craft-based livelihoods and tourism as part of Kutch's rebuilding efforts after the 2001 devastating earthquake in the region. The entrepreneurial and resilient spirit of Kutchi communities has also played an

⁴ As per the Fourth All India Handloom Census 2019-20 by the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India.

⁵ As per AIACA Report.

important role in the region's recovery and resurgence after the 2001 natural disaster. Kutch is also home to pioneering initiatives such as design education for young artisans which in other parts of India is largely the monopoly of urban educated youth. Through efforts of local civil society organisations, working closely with communities, there is also a gradual revival towards use of indigenous cotton and wool raw materials that is suitable to the local ecology.

COVID-19 DATA FOR GUJARAT AND KUTCH

As per Government of India data 12,77,615 (about 1.27 million) were the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Gujarat.⁶ With total deaths numbered at 11,043.⁷

District-wise the figure for total recovered patients in Kutch stood at 20,138, and 37,87,473 for those under quarantine. The total number of deaths in Kutch district being 146 (about 1.3 percent of the state's total).⁸

The Gujarat government initiated various measures in March 2020 before the national lockdown to respond to the evolving COVID situation. Educational institutions, gyms, malls, national parks, etc. were shut down. COVID-19 guidelines were issued. Partial lockdown was announced in five cities including in Kutch.

With the nation-wide lockdown initiated from March 25, 2020, a state wide lockdown became operational. Various hospitals were designated as COVID treatment facilities, steps were taken for adequate staffing at hospitals, free rations were provided to the poor and daily wagers, etc. The first nation-wide lockdown which was planned until April 14 was continued till May 31, 2020. Except essential services, the lockdown suspended all activities including transport, offices, factories, educational institutions, social, cultural, religious gatherings, etc. From early June 2020, phase wise reopening was begun with the issuance of respective unlock guidelines.⁹

CRAFTS FOCUS

The crafts chosen for the survey were in two broad categories: textile embellishment and weaving that constituting a large portion of the craft based livelihoods in the region.

⁶ https://gujccovid19.gujarat.gov.in/_Data accessed: 14 January 2023.

⁷ Ibid. The number of recovered patients (cured/discharged/migrated) for Gujarat being estimated at 12,66,555 (about 1.26 million). The total number of quarantine cases reported at 12,20,12,032 (122 million) Data accessed: 14 January 2023.

⁸ <https://www.mygov.in/corona-data/covid19-statewise-status/> The data accessed on 13 January 2023. However, there remains a gap in government statistical information on COVID-19s depth and scale.

⁹ India began its public vaccination program on 16 January 2021.

Textile Embellishment: Bandhani/ Tie-dye on Textiles

Bandhani (Figure 1) is the traditional craft of tie-dye whereby patterning on textiles is created by tightly tying multiple parts of the fabric with thread to resist dyes and create dot like puckered designs. The tied fabric is dyed once or multiple times depending on the colour palette. The patterns created in the resist dyed fabric are revealed as the cloth is untied. The designs created can be in the form of dots, squares, waves, or stripes. The Kutch region in Gujarat is particularly known for very fine Bandhanis that are created with higher number of minute knots.

The tying of the fabric is generally done by women. Men are usually involved in dyeing of the fabric. The use of natural dyes such as madder roots and pomegranate which was traditionally practiced has seen a revival over the years. Bandhani is practiced by the Khatri community of the Kutch region. It is estimated that about 15,000 women are involved in this craft in Kutch.¹⁰

These textiles are used as daily wear as well as for special occasions like weddings, festivals and other sacred ceremonies where intricately designed Bandhini knotted patterned textiles are used. The design innovations by tie-dye practitioners have made the craft popular among urban clientele and in export markets as well. Young artisan-designers spearheading the Bandhini work are further revitalising the craft.



Figure 1. Bandhini textiles, Adil Khatri's workplace, Bhuj. (Photo: Nivedita Negi)

¹⁰ <https://kutchcraftcollective.com/crafts-of-kutch/soft-material-crafts/>

Handloom Weaving

Handloom weaving is practiced by various communities in Kutch with each following their own specialization. The focus of field research was on three different communities and three different specialities.

Kutchi or Kachchh handloom weaving

The Marwada or Vankar community of weavers who migrated from Rajasthan and settled in Bhujodi village in Kutch are associated with the Kutchi or Kachchh handloom weaving (Figure 2). The weaving follows an extra weft technique whereby intricate motifs are created on the fabric by inserting supplementary weft yarns. Cotton and wool yarn are used for weaving that is done on either pit loom or frame loom. Traditionally, indigenous cotton yarn known as kala cotton was sourced from the Ahir farming communities in the region. Sheep and goat wool was procured from the pastoralist herding community of Rabaris.

These communities also formed the clientele of the Vankar weaving community who wove shawls, veils, skirts and blankets for them. Over time, there was a shift to producing for markets outside the local communities. Mill made yarns began to be used and procurement was done from outside markets such as other parts of Gujarat and Punjab. Khamir, one of the key NGOs in the region, has been in the process of reviving the use of indigenous Kala cotton yarn suited to the arid conditions of the region. Traditionally men were involved in weaving while women supported in pre-weaving activities such as warp preparation for the loom. However, in present times women are also involved in weaving.



Figure 2. Kutchi handloom weaving, Dinesh Siju Vishram's workplace, Bhujodi. (Photo: Nivedita Negi)



Figure 3. Kharad floor rugs, at Tejshi Dhana's workspace, Kukma. (Photo: Nivedita Negi)

Kharad Floor rug weaving

The second textile specialisation is of Kharad floor rugs (Figure 3), woven by the Marwada community using camel and sheep wool. The community also weave Kharad cloth called *Khurjani* that is used as a throw for the back of the camel and a thick cloth called Rasa to cover grains. Traditionally local hand spun wool was used while gradually wool procurement had to be done from outside as local hand spinning declined. The demand for products which were earlier used by local communities also suffered. The craft is endangered today with only 1 or 2 families engaged in it currently.

Weaving waste plastic

The third being the upcycling of waste plastic through weaving and its further conversion into products. This new innovative craft was introduced in 2011 by Khamir, a key NGO in the region. Since 2018 it is run by a woman artisan-entrepreneur in Bhuj town. Starting with 3 women the project now supports 30-40 women.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Overview

Artisans across India, including in Kutch faced great challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. In its first phase of total lockdown the artisans faced loss of income and a total cessation of work. In phase-2 with the slow opening of the country and the overall economic slowdown and lack of disposable income lowered consumer spending, leaving them vulnerable with a survey of consumers reporting that 69 percent had decreased their spending on crafts after the pandemic. As per a British Council Report (Reimagining the Craft Economy Post Covid-19), The road to recovery seemed slow, evolving in new directions.

The challenges faced by the artisans and artisan-entrepreneurs surveyed in the field research related to aspects extending from loss of business and income to changing and unstable market conditions and finding ways and means to adapt. On the positive side the pandemic had been an opportunity for producers to assess business aspects such as inventory and production planning. For craft organisations and entrepreneurs, it had been a time to reflect upon their business models and adapt them to evolving scenarios.

Impact on Production Activities

Unlike other cultural industries in India crafts production is primarily home-based with work and living areas often located within the same premises. The pandemic therefore did not fully halt the production activities for many artisans who continued to operate although on a much reduced scale. For artisans employed as wage earners who are dependent on master artisans or others for provision of work, the lockdown however meant complete loss of work and income during that period.

Orders from wholesale buyers and retailers including domestic and export orders are vital for craftspeople and their businesses. They are important to ensure year round production and regular income. The COVID-19 lockdown that began in March 2020 and subsequent halting of marketing opportunities led to cancellation of orders for artisans and craft enterprises. The artisan entrepreneurs we spoke to did not face the issue of large finished goods inventory. This can perhaps be due to the fact that the main exhibition season in winter months of October-February had just finished prior to the onset of the pandemic.



Figure 4. Indigo dyed yarn, at Dinesh Siju Vankar's family indigo dyeing unit, Bhujodi. (Photo: Nivedita Negi)

However, the availability of raw materials was a challenge for craft producers during COVID. In case of handloom weaving in Kutch, both cotton and wool are used. As cotton is procured locally from Gujarat, its procurement was not a major issue. Wool is procured from other states such as Rajasthan and Punjab. For the first few months of lockdown, the weaver entrepreneurs had stock of raw material. Once the supply of wool became limited, they were left with no work. They utilised the limited quantity to produce design intensive pieces that could potentially be sold for higher prices later. For the Kutchi weaver, Dineshbhai and his family, they were also able to utilise the available time to prepare the stock of natural dyed yarn as they have their own natural dyeing unit (Figure 4).

For Kharad weavers, raw material was not an issue as the camel and sheep wool that is used is procured locally from Maldharis pastoralists community of Kutch. The Bandhani tie-dye artisans procure fabric from outside Kutch from Surat, Jamnagar and Ahmedabad in Gujarat, Bangalore, Tamil Nadu, and other parts of India. For Adil Khatri, the artisan-entrepreneur respondent, although some of his raw material was sourced from other states, he was fortunate to have the stock of raw material as they 'plan their materials inventory in advance.' However, on a more general scale, it can be safely assumed that raw material has been a big challenge where procurement is done from different locations in the country.

Transformation of Practices under the Pandemic Situation

Plain yardage production: The distinctiveness of traditional Kutchi handloom weaving is the intricate extra-weft motifs woven in cotton or wool. The product range include clothing like shawls, stoles, blankets, saris and yardage, and home-furnishing.

'As the markets have opened up there is a huge demand for yardage due to lack of production during the pandemic years. The production in Kutch handloom weaving is thus currently largely focused on producing plain yardage. This is seen as a big shift from the earlier practice of producing mainly finished textile products with traditional motifs. The current emphasis on plain yardage production with varying quality standards has implications on skill transmission as well. Many young weavers who are in the learning phase are starting production with plain yardage and have not had the opportunity to hone their skills in the traditional extra-weft weaving technique. This is perhaps a temporary phase to meet the current demand for plain fabric. The long term impact of this development can be assessed only with time' Artisan-Weaver Dinesh Vishram Siju.

In terms of innovation in craft practices, all the artisan respondents reiterated that experimentation is not a new phenomenon and that craft communities in the region have always been adapting to new aesthetics. For instance, the traditional colours in handloom weaving and even Bandhini tie-dye were restricted to black, red and yellow. Over time, a wide variety of colours were introduced to the colour palette including natural dyes. In Kharad weaving, the floor coverings and

other products were traditionally undyed and in natural wool colours (Figure 5). Natural dyes were gradually introduced. Similarly, Kharad weavers also introduced cotton yarn apart from wool to meet the market demands. Motifs were introduced while earlier designs were restricted to stripes.

Creative Explorations

Craft practices in Kutch and generally across India have always adapted and evolved to the times. Also, as a community is not a homogenous entity there are individuals within the community with varying skill levels and openness to change. As raw material supply was limited and regular production for markets was not taking place, some of the artisans invested themselves in design explorations with the limited materials they had. They worked on new patterns and sampling. Such creative activities also helped to maintain mental health in times of distress and uncertainty.

Champa Kishor, one of the young women weaver respondents utilised this period to develop textile art pieces inspired mostly by the natural environment of Kutch (Figure 6). This has added a new dimension to her work. It also helped her cope with the unfortunate loss of a close family member due to COVID. She also experimented with making accessories like bags using recycled yarn. While some of her experiments did not convert into sales due to pricing issues, she feels confident to continue her explorations as a textile artist.



Figure 5. Kharad floor rugs in cotton with motifs, Tejshi Dhana, Kukma.
(Photo: Nivedita Negi)



Figure 6. Top left: Siju Champa Kishor with her child; Top right: Bag with recycled yarn. Below: Hand woven textile art work by Champa. (Photo: Nivedita Negi)

Women Weavers

Traditionally, weaving in Kutch is done by men while women support in ancillary activities like loom preparation, finishing, etc. However, over the years, women have also started weaving on the looms. The artisans reported that since COVID there has been a further increase in the number of women weavers. One of the reasons cited was the need to supplement the family income once the production work resumed after COVID.

They have also been part of a weaving initiative started by the NGO Khamir to upcycle plastic waste into various products. A successful woman artisan-entrepreneur like Rajiben (Figure 7) is also creating employment for women in her community. Starting out with 3 women from the family, her weaving venture with recycled plastic waste currently supports 30-40 women. She recounts her story 'My family was full time into farming. Also, women did not weave and did not even have the opportunity for education beyond a certain age. I had a strong desire to learn weaving from an early age. I too wanted to weave like others in the community. My father did not support me but with my brother's help I managed to learn weaving during my spare time. The opportunity to engage as a weaver for livelihood came when for about 3 years there were no rains and farming was severely affected in our village. With no income option left, my father gave me a go ahead. In 2011, I became associated with Khamir's plastic waste weaving project. I worked with Khamir until 2018 and had the opportunity to participate in an international exchange programme. In 2018, with Khamir's support I decided to pursue my own work as a weaver.'



Figure 7. Rajiben Vankar at her stall at Dastkar exhibition in Delhi. Right: Her products woven with waste plastic and fabric scraps. (Photo: R. Sethi)



Figure 8. Cotton and wool yarn at Khamir. (Photo: Nivedita Negi)



Figure 9. Dinesh Vishram hand spinning yarn while interacting with us. (Photo: Nivedita Negi)

Prior to COVID, she was marketing her products through exhibitions and visitors. She began to explore online sales during the pandemic. These were facilitated through other NGOs with whom she continues to be closely associated. Both online and exhibition sales picked up for their enterprise after COVID. Apart from marketing, she provided free of cost trainings to women in her village who were keen to take up weaving. She has also been associated as a livelihood trainer with organisations in Mumbai whereby she has trained about 350 women from tribal areas. She further adds 'Initially my daughter wanted to become a teacher. However, she now wants to be a part of the work I am doing.' While she had to face many challenges when she started out including disapproval from her community, her story of resilience has been inspiring many women in her community towards their own empowerment.

Locally Available Raw Materials

While exploration with local raw materials such as Kala cotton and indigenous wool had been initiated by Khamir (Figure 8) over the last few years, the pandemic has further reiterated the value of building local supply chains. Dineshbhai (Figure 9) puts it aptly 'Local procurement of all kinds of yarn may not be possible in today's context. But experimentation is happening.' He cites the example of his nephew who is growing indigo on his own farm. 'We do not buy indigo from the market. We source from our farm and process it.' They have indigo vats which are about 25 years old. Hand spinning is another activity that has shown potential for creating income opportunities for women. Currently, Khamir has about 250 women hand spinners of cotton and wool yarn. Shri Tejshi Dhana, a leading master craftsperson in Kharad weaving wonderfully states the value of local raw materials 'There is more demand for cotton rugs and we can certainly do more of that. But we want to work more with our traditional

material which is wool so that we can keep supporting the Maldharis (pastoralists) too who supply the wool.'

Impact on Marketing

Marketing and sales was completely stopped during the lockdowns. National and State level NGOs, government organisations, private entrepreneurs that provide market access to artisans through regular fairs at various cities across India had to cancel all their exhibitions during the course of the pandemic.

Even after the lockdown was lifted and markets resumed sporadically there was lack of footfalls in exhibitions and retail stores, tourism was negligible. For the respondents including individual artisans and craft organisations, exhibitions and festive events in India are important marketing and showcase opportunities and for making contacts with long-term potential new customers, wholesale buyers, boutiques and exporters. For the Kharad weavers particularly, the marketing seems to be primarily dependent on tourists and exhibitions such as the government organised exhibitions like the Surajkund Mela in Faridabad near Delhi. They do not sell in local markets in Kutch similar to other artisan respondents in Kutch. Their losses due to cancellation of exhibitions were thus a big blow to those who cater to urban domestic markets.

In Kutch, craft marketing is also linked to tourism opportunities whereby visitors travel to places such as Bhuj and Ajrakhpur in Kutch to experience the local culture and crafts and buy directly from artisans. As mentioned above, the Kharad weavers depend primarily on tourists who visit their premises to buy products and place orders. As the travel industry was severely hit it impacted the income potential for artisans through tourists and resulted in a decline in income. However, tourism is showing signs of recovery as visitors could be seen visiting the artisan premises during our field visit.

Order Cancellations and Post-Pandemic Changes

The onset of pandemic also led to cancellation of orders for craft enterprises. Although artisans reported instances of few clients who provided support by paying in advance for future orders, mostly the situation was grim. This in turn led to inability to provide work to the artisans associated with them. The loss of work and income was particularly severe for artisans' dependent on job-work such as women engaged in tying the knots for Bandhani textiles.

While sales through physical channels such as exhibitions etc. were hampered, the pandemic resulted in the growth of online/digital marketing avenues. Most of the artisan-entrepreneurs respondents use online tools. However, they do not prefer selling online through e-commerce sites or their own websites. The wholesale orders to boutique stores and other clients seem to be the mainstay for these enterprises. They also emphasised that personalised marketing such as

word-of-mouth promotions and long-standing relationships with clients work better for their product range.

A post-pandemic trend that has been reported by artisan respondents is an increase in the number of middlemen and increased competitiveness in prices which has implications on product quality as well.

Use of Online Tools

The pandemic led to the proliferation of use of digital tools across industries. It resulted in artisans learning and adapting to digital technologies and on-boarding on various e-commerce platforms to market their products. The organisations working with artisans also began to actively engage online to create wider awareness about the common challenges for the artisanal sector during the pandemic. It was also an opportunity for them to build their internal capacities to respond to the evolving digital scenario.

New digital marketing initiatives specifically targeting the artisanal sector were also launched that aimed at supporting artisan entrepreneurs to establish their own brands through various services including an online marketplace for their products.

While online promotion cannot be ignored in a growing digital world, the impact of online marketing to create sustained income for craft producers is still evolving. Some of the Kutch based artisans in a webinar mentioned ‘time management issues as good photo shoot, product descriptions, and logistics add to regular production work. Tonal differences in handmade products in the way the product appears online and actual product leads to returns and rejections. Price competition and too many options online for buyers is another issue.’¹¹

Similar view was echoed by textile artisan respondents in field interactions. The artisans who cater to niche markets that value handlooms and handcrafted textiles do not prefer selling online. They however actively use online tools such as Whatsapp to build their network of wholesale buyers and direct customers. They also have active social media presence particularly on Instagram.

For artisan-entrepreneur like Champa Kishor, her marketing for textile art work is currently limited to online channels such as Instagram. She had the opportunity to be part of a capacity building course on online marketing during the pandemic. She states, ‘As a result of the training, I have now transitioned to fully managing my Instagram account where earlier it was remotely handled by a friend.’ However, she is aware that diversifying her marketing beyond online means is essential for sustaining her work.

For the NGO Khamir (Figure 10), the need to engage more actively with online technologies meant new learnings. For instance, they had to build their capacities in better product presentation and product photography. They also experi-

¹¹ Webinar by Khamir: Conversations from Kutch – Mastering the future after COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 10. Ghatit Laheru (Director, Khamir) at his office during our meeting. Right: Khamir's retail store at their premises. (Photo: Nivedita Negi)



Figure 11. Adil Khatri at his workspace during our meeting. Left and Right: His bandhini (tie-dye) creations. (Photo: Nivedita Negi)

mented with converting a part of their physical retail store into a photo studio. In 2020, Khamir organised an online series called 'Conversations from Kutch' that enabled dissemination of community voices as craft practitioners from Kutch participated in these conversations and shared their experiences and concerns to a wider audience. They also collaborated as partners with other platforms that were launched during COVID to support artisans to sell online by providing various kinds of support such as e-catalogues, on-boarding on e-commerce sites, pricing, etc. 'While online marketing/sales have not been great for us, we realise that digital engagement is a must. So, we will continue to actively engage and build our capacities in this aspect.' (Ghatit Laheru, Director, Khamir)

Participation of Younger Generation in Craft Practices

Kutch has had a vibrant tradition in crafts and the efforts of various civil society organisations and initiatives have also played a critical role in the continued sustenance of the practices. This has created an enabling atmosphere where younger generation are motivated to continue engaging with their traditional community practices. The efforts of Somaiya Kala Vidya (SKV) that provides formal education in design and entrepreneurship to youth from artisan families have been significant in providing new creative approaches to younger artisan designers and entrepreneurs.

Adil Khatri (Figure 11), a young Bandhini artisan-designer who along with his wife Zakiya Khatri runs Nilak, a contemporary design company producing Kutchi tie-dye products. Both are graduates of SKV. Adil Khatri emphasises 'There is a huge difference in my work pre and post design education. The technique is traditional but designs and motifs can be completely new and contemporary. I also work with old motifs in new placements. Traditionally, red, black and yellow formed the colour palette. Today we are working with a whole range of colours including pastels, indigo, etc. Experimentation is thus constant. I work with new designs every year. About 15 new samples are created every year. Our production is smaller in quantity and more design oriented.'

He has been part of various leading national and international platforms including the International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe and was recently part of a collaborative project with Mexican artisan-designers.

In Kharad weaving too, the younger member in the family is experimenting with new products (Figure 12). The product range in Kharad primarily includes woollen floor rugs and coverings and belts for camels. The demand for these products is not very high due to climatic conditions and lifestyle changes. There is a need for product diversification which is being led by Hirabhai Tejshi, the younger member in the Kharad family who is exploring production of bags, waist belts, etc. He further informed 'I was in Delhi for 3 months as part of a project with IGNC, Ministry of Culture. I was involved in weaving demonstration and creating new samples at the upcoming crafts centre at Red Fort.'

Champa Kishor, the young woman weaver, was part of the 6-month Creative and Cultural Business Programme conducted by the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad. The course helped her to further engage with her traditional weaving practice through creative explorations. Since the pandemic, she has been in the process of developing a distinct identity for her work as a textile artist based on traditional weaving technique.

The pandemic does not seem to have negatively impacted the participation of younger generation in the craft practices. Due to availability of time, it seems that the COVID period also allowed families the opportunity to teach various nuances of the craft to younger members.

Perhaps with growing awareness about handlooms and handicrafts and influx of



Figure 12. Young Kharad weavers preparing the loom. (Photo: Nivedita Negi)

social media among other factors, it was reported that a greater number of weavers now take pride in wearing their own hand woven cloth. While this trend may be limited currently to a few families, with majority still wearing cheaper synthetic materials, this is indeed a very positive development. It also perhaps underlines the strong identification that the younger generation in Kutch continues to have with their traditional craft practices. Dineshbhai shared ‘For the festive occasion of Diwali my niece insisted on wearing our own hand woven fabric. The design work and stitching of the fabric was done in Jaipur.’ Rajiben shares her experience of the situation ‘Many youngsters who earlier wanted to pursue jobs feel motivated after seeing successful examples to pursue their own work in weaving. After COVID, they also feel that perhaps there is still more certainty in one’s own work than in a job.’

Initiatives by NGOs in the Kutch Region

Kutch has an active network of NGOs many of whom are working to promote craft based livelihoods. They have been providing support to artisanal communities at organisational and collective level. For instance, during the pandemic Khamir provided more than 1,000 ration kits and yarn kits to communities. They also made efforts to advocate for state government support for distribution of yarn kits. Due to very little information about COVID in the villages, they engaged in raising COVID related awareness among communities in about 25 villages in the region. Khamir was also part of Kutch Karuna Abhiyan that was launched during the second COVID wave to provide various kinds of emergency relief measures to vulnerable groups including artisans in Kutch.

Instead of working in silos, the leading craft organisations of Kutch such as

Khamir, Shrujan, Qasab, Kala Raksha and Vivekananda Rural Development Institute (VRDI) collaborated under the umbrella of Kutch Crafts Collective to 'maximise impact'¹² and promote the distinctive identity of crafts from the region. Various crafts of Kutch are provided marketing and other support as part of the collaborative. During the pandemic the Collective had launched the COVID-19 Kaarigar Fund to support the immediate needs of the artisan communities and provide long-term support for the development of crafts in the region.

Government Initiatives to Support Recovery from the Pandemic

Vocal for local campaign: The Government of India launched the Vocal for Local campaign in May 2020 to garner support for domestic industries including small businesses and local products. This was particularly relevant in the context of handcrafted products that are not only local but also largely sustainable with much lower environmental impact. The #Vocal4handmade online campaign that specifically focused on handlooms was launched on the 6th National Handloom Day in August 2020 by the Government to create wide public appreciation and support for handlooms.

Marketing support: The State Handloom Cooperatives/Marketing Agencies have been requested to buy finished goods from weavers to provide them immediate income support. The Government has made efforts to link artisans to e-commerce sites by on-boarding various cooperatives and government marketing agencies to digital marketplaces. Also, efforts were made to organise virtual marketing events. The India Textile Sourcing Fair was organised virtually in August 2020 by the Handloom Export Promotion Council (HEPC) to connect handloom producers to global markets.

Government E-Marketplace (GeM): Although launched in 2016, the initiative is highly relevant for current times as it aims to register 50 lakh artisans and weavers on the GeM portal so that they can sell directly to various Government departments and to encourage procurement of handmade products by Government buyers. As per a press release by the Ministry of Textiles, 8,374 artisans and 149,422 weavers have registered on the portal as of August 30, 2021.¹³

Linking textiles to tourism: As part of this long-term initiative by the Ministry of Textiles, the handloom and handicraft clusters where artisans are concentrated are being provided with various kinds of support to develop them as craft villages and link them to tourist places. 8 craft villages have been identified so far

¹² <https://kutchcraftcollective.com/about-us/>

¹³ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1756422>

Note: Paper based on investigative research conducted for the project titled 'Research on ICH affected by the COVID-19 pandemic under the auspices of by International Research Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (IRCI), Japan. The research team included the author of the paper, Snigdha Bisht, Consultant, Craft Revival Trust, with photo and video documentation by Nivedita Negi, Research Associate, Craft Revival Trust.

for support. Although there are potential challenges of over-commercialisation and craft imitations, the initiative provides an opportunity for linking intangible and tangible cultural heritage with overall local development.

New Initiatives/Approaches that Emerged to Support Artisans during and after COVID

While individual artisans and crafts businesses were hit hard during the pandemic, it also led to increased solidarity within the craft sector in India to collaborate and provide urgent support to the artisan communities. Collectives. Several initiatives mobilised craft producers, marketing and design professionals, entrepreneurs and student interns to come together via digital platforms such as zoom and Whatsapp to respond collectively to the crisis. These collectives provided food rations and medical kits to artisans in distress. Various other measures were taken to provide business and capacity building support to artisans.

These organisations helped liquidate stocks through various digital platforms and exhibitions; created digital catalogues to support artisans with marketing; on-boarded artisans on digital platforms to sell their products besides distributing COVID relief kits. Additionally, trainings in product photography using mobile phones, catalogue making and digital marketing were conducted. Capacity building trainings and marketing support were also provided to empower and sustain the artisans.

Capacity Building and Creative Exchanges through Digital Means

India has the advantage of rapidly growing mobile subscription and internet connectivity including in rural areas. As mentioned earlier, digital tools began to be extensively used by creative producers and professionals since the COVID period. While digital platforms as marketing avenues are evolving, the usage of online tools for creating awareness, conducting workshops, discussions and design explorations was significant and continues to remain in the post COVID period.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

- The need to strengthen rural livelihoods such as in the artisanal sector of traditional craftsmanship which is largely rural based in India has been further underlined during the pandemic situation. The urban craft artisans had been hit hard by the pandemic due to loss of livelihoods and other vulnerabilities. Skilled artisanal employment presents viable livelihood alternative to urban migration, contributes to local development and environmental sustainability.

- Formal school education and design and entrepreneurship education for young members of artisan communities have been highlighted by artisans themselves as vital for their individual growth and for the continuation and revitalisation of craft practices.
- Creative inspiration and innovation while retaining the core identity of the crafts is emphasised by the practitioners as a time tested strategy to safeguard craft traditions and livelihoods and bring respect and prosperity to the communities.
- Collaboration between artisan-designers and urban designers based on a spirit of reciprocity and mutual respect is seen as an important step to retain the dynamism and relevance of the practices and for the creative growth of individual practitioners.
- Regular and updated capacity building in usage of digital tools and associated skills such as product photography, product styling, digital catalogues, digital marketing, etc. is crucial for artisan entrepreneurs and NGOs working with artisans to enable them to respond to rapidly evolving digital opportunities.
- Increased opportunities for marketing and stock liquidation through exhibitions and other physical avenues cannot be emphasised enough as a continuous effort needed to help revive the craft businesses.
- Schools and colleges located in and around the handloom and handicraft clusters can be encouraged to adopt handwoven and handcrafted fabric for uniforms. This is important both to support artisanal livelihoods and to recognise and promote the distinct craft traditions of the region.
- Collaborative efforts are vital to support craft based livelihoods. Collaborations across organisations at the local level as demonstrated in Kutch are important to increase outreach and impact.
- Campaigns for wider public awareness regarding crafts and their economic, cultural and ecological values can play an educational role towards crafts appreciation and respect for practitioners among consumers.