

# Design Education and Handloom Weaving in India

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## Introduction

Handloom weaving is one of the oldest crafts on the subcontinent. Sophisticated weaving techniques appear to have been in use as early as the Indus Valley Civilisation, as discoveries of equipment and impressions of woven fabric show (Askari and Crill 1997). There are references to weaving in the sacred Hindu texts, the Vedas, extracts of which were included in the folk songs of weavers while at the loom (Ramaswamy 2013). Written evidence dates back to the first Arab and European explorers and the East India Companies.

Weaving continues to be an important part of the economy, social life and identity of weaving communities all over India, and is currently a source of employment for 4.3 million workers (Handloom Census of India 2009 - 2010). From the nineteenth century onwards, it experienced a decline due to the development of mechanised imitations flooding local markets. Since Independence, there has been a growing urban and global market for hand-crafted, 'authentic' and traditional craft products. Indian craftspeople have been adapting their craft for these markets, helped by government and non-government initiatives and commercial enterprises. These interventions have varied in success. Recently, a new approach to design development has been design education for traditional artisans

From the earliest written evidence as well as the physical evidence of the textiles themselves, we can see that patronage of crafts flourished throughout medieval India. The Delhi sultanate who ruled from 1206 – 1526, and the Mughals, from 1526 - 1857 commissioned artisans in a variety of crafts to produce goods, for the royal court. Artisans working in the royal karkhanas were well looked after and recognised for their skills (Verma 1994).

Maheshwar, a sari weaving town in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, a region which my research focuses on, was ruled by Maharani Ahilya Bhai Holkar from 1767 until her death in 1795. During her rule, she invited weavers from all over India to build a successful weaving industry. It was common all over India for weavers to migrate to areas with rich resources and patronage. Guilds worked as an intermediary between the state and the market and crafts training was a significant part of the guilds along with collective regulation of product, labour and entrepreneurship (Roy 2008).

Knowledge and skills were transmitted orally from father to son, and through apprenticeships with a master craftsmen. This arrangement continues today in many rural communities. Prior to industrialisation and the influx of imported fabrics, craftspeople had long-standing reciprocal relationships with their local clients which continued down through the generations. This is the traditional system for the weavers of Bhujodi, a village in Kutch, Gujarat state.

The Vankars (weavers) in Kutch are from the Meghwal community, a traditionally oppressed community treated as 'untouchables' in the past. They rely on desi, or wool spun from fleeces supplied by neighbouring cattle and sheep herding communities, namely the Rabaris (Edwards 2011). The Vankars then make woollen veilcloths, skirts and blankets for the Rabari and Ahir communities. Vankars would weave part time, only when these items were required and would work in farming for the remaining time. Weaving families had long standing relationships with their client families which, like the weaving itself would be passed from generation to generation. Further, the Rabari held strong value for these woven wool items. Black wool for the women's veilcloth held particular religious importance. Today, most of these local clients have been lost due to the availability of cheaper materials and mass-produced cloth.



**Image 1: A traditional dhabla (blanket) for the Rabari community woven in local, hand-spun and un-dyed sheep's wool. Courtesy of Vankar Shamji Vishram Valiji. Photo: Ruth Clifford**

## Education

The British introduced formal education firstly to create a class of Westernised Indians to serve the needs of the British. Art schools were set up in a similar vein - to train the artisans to adopt new more European styles to eventually improve trade.

But education would often be caught between two conflicting ideals: some British art school teachers and directors imposed Western ideals using Western methods, while orientalist wanted to preserve South Asian traditional arts, heritage, local languages and culture. According to Deepali (Deepali 2001), Ernest Havell, director of the Madras School of Art in the 1880s, introduced objects of the past as subjects of study for the first time, as part of his encouragement of the "prevention of degradation" (McGowan 2009), a view held also by Cecil Burns who was president of the Art School in Bombay, and Lockwood Kipling, director of the Mayo School of Art in Lahore, all of whom trained at South Kensington school of arts at the time of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

During the swadeshi (self-sufficiency) movement, Tagore established Santiniketan in Bengal with the aim of decentralising education, which Gandhi also campaigned for. Santiniketan taught arts and crafts amongst other subjects in a holistic way within nature, encouraging freedom of expression (Mukherjee 1970). After independence in 1947, while there were strong efforts to rebuild a national identity, the education system continued much in the same vein as it had during British rule (Kumar Desai 2010). J.P Naik, eminent education activist and writer, developed the concept of a 'learning society' which drew on the ideals of Gandhi and Tagore. He was emphatic about education being the chief instrument of social transformation in India, and was against the existing formal education which excluded the learning of productive handicrafts. He wanted education to be more closely linked to vocational work (Singh 2013).

However, these ideals were largely ignored by the Congress government in power at the time. Singh concludes her article exploring the mix of Indian and British influences in education, by stating that education from the Raj through to post-independence India was 'neither British or Indian, but colonial' (ibid).

I would apply Singh's theory to the handicrafts sector at the time. Nationalism brought about a re-birth in the idealism and romanticism of India's crafts and craftspeople, as members of the Arts and Crafts movement such as George Birdwood (Birdwood 1880), had initiated. Greenough (1995), Kurin (1991) and Venkatessan (2009), amongst others, have discussed the continuing romanticism of village craftsmen, evident in Museum exhibits, particularly those that have included living craftsmen such as the Dilli Haat. McKnight (2013) has discussed the way that crafts are categorized and mapped by the Dilli Haat and Crafts Museum in Delhi that gives each craft a fixed place and identity, and represents the body of a craftsman 'both as a symbol of tradition and a source of anxiety' (McKnight 2013). They are displayed as an important aspect of the nation's identity that need preserving and protected from the polluting influences of modern society and technological development. Clifford (1998), Scrase (2003), Bundgaard (1999), and others have explored the continuing perception of artisans as in need of help, and the establishment of hierarchical system and division between development professionals, or members of the elite 'art world' and the struggling artisan. Sundari and Mukund (2001) in their analysis of the cotton handloom industry in Andhra Pradesh, state that the government policies after independence were based on a belief that economic efficiency and growth are achieved in modern sector, and that the traditional sector's main advantage was employment generation. The government's Ministry of Textiles set up the India Handicrafts board in 1953, first to help improve the marketing of crafts (Jain and Coelho 1996), and attempted to improve loom technology for weavers. Sundari and Makund as well as many others, reveal the ineffectiveness of the majority of government efforts to revive handloom weaving and link weavers with markets. The centralised organisation of the cooperatives, meant that objectives weren't properly implemented on the ground level, wages were often low due to high raw materials costs, and marketing input was ineffective.

Other government initiatives include the [Geographical Indication Act](#), 1999, which seeks to link a craft products' identity such as the Maheshwari sari or the Kutchi shawl to their place of origin. This, while giving them exclusivity and preventing widespread replication (which still manages to happen) prevents dynamism and innovation of the craft (Kawira 2014).

Further, the implementation and promotion of these crafts are done by a peripheral elite force based on their idea of authenticity and tradition, and excludes the artisans's own input. This scheme, along with the National Award scheme and the cooperative movement have been ways of regulating the craft and communities, continuing the British ideal of community based on authentic Indian society (Upadhya 2001, Dirks 2001).

Despite these criticisms, these government initiatives paved the way for a large number of non-governmental and commercial-led development organisations.

A new wave of design education began with the founding of the National Institute of Design (NID) in 1961, based on the research of the eminent designers Charles and Ray Eames and inspired by the Bauhaus ideals. While more institutes have opened following the success of NID, design education, even for eligible students, is limited in India. It is mostly reserved for the upper classes and urban elites educated in English. Many Indians in rural areas receive only basic primary education, which doesn't qualify them for higher education at institutes like NID.

The first few NID graduates found it difficult to apply the skills they had learned during the education to the workplace – the design concepts being so new to India. Thus many graduates set up businesses of their own, and NID alumni make up a large part of the commercial and non-governmental craft development initiatives, many of which involve collaboration between designer and artisan – the designer acting as an intermediary between the artisan and market. This arrangement has initiated debate over ownership of new designs, the hierarchical division between designer and artisan and in some cases, the reduction of the status of the artisan to labourer (Herzfeld 2004, DeNicola and DeNicola 2012). The artisan is seen as skilled, and situated in the realm of physical labour, they have learned their craft by 'doing', while the designer, is considered a creative thinker, a title developed through formal education (Balaram 2005).

So far the existing literature on design education post-independence seems only to focus on the urban high profile design institutes such as NID. There is wide-ranging research on development efforts including individual, temporary workshops, but nothing on a continuing in-depth design education curriculum for artisans.

## Design Education for traditional artisans

Recently design education for rural artisans has emerged, and I have come across two institutes that teach contemporary design principles for artisans working in a traditional craft, both which have received little or no academic research. Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya (KRV) is a design institute for rural artisans founded in Kutch, North West India, in 2005 (Frater 2007). Most tuition at KRV is in the vernacular - Gujarati, or Hindi, and consists of five two week classes spread throughout the year with a break in between each, during which students return home to apply what they have learnt and produce samples in their traditional craft. The classes are: Basic Design: Sourcing from Nature and Heritage; Colour: Sourcing from Nature and Heritage; Marketing Orientation; Concept, Communication and Sampling; Collection Development and Finishing; and Presentation and Merchandising. The founder of KRV, Judy Frater, set up a new school for artisans - Somaiya Kala Vidya (SKV) - in 2014, which is an expansion of KRV, continuing the same curriculum, and includes business and management courses. The majority of weavers who have graduated from KRV have diversified the range of fibres they use to include silk, merino wool and cotton and have innovated with colours, and established a global clientele.



Image 2: Pravin Devji Siju's presentation to the final jury, October 2015. Photo: Ruth Clifford

Alongside SKV's pilot course last year, they ran an outreach project, which involved three KRV graduate weavers from Bhujodi village in Kutch, travelling to a weaving village in Bagalkot, Karnataka where they teamed up with five weavers on a collaborative project. The Bagalkot weavers will soon be relocated due to the expansion of the nearby Almatti dam. Judy Frater developed this project after being invited to a think tank on the development of the region. The two groups of weavers took elements of each other's traditional weaving and produced a collection of saris, dupattas and stoles for an exhibition in Mumbai where most weavers sold the majority of their collections. The Bagalkot weavers are now continuing to receive design tuition in their local area from SKV teachers. This study will allow me to assess whether or not design education has improved the Bagalkot weavers' livelihoods, as well as to explore the possibilities of the transmission and translation of design skills from one weaving community to another, rather than from an external development agent.



**Image 3: Bagalkot and Bhujodi weavers giving a presentation during the second Bhujodi to Bagalkot project exhibition at Artisans' gallery Mumbai, October 2015.**  
Photo: Ruth Clifford

The second institute is the charitable organisation Women Weave in Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh which was founded to help revive the town's rich sari weaving tradition, and provide a sustainable income for local women. This year the organization has run the pilot year of their Handloom School which will teach design skills, IT, business and English. I will experience the results of the final part of the pilot year in my fieldwork schedule. This will provide a distinctive comparison to the other studies as the majority of weavers who attend The Handloom School come from weaving communities in different regions of India, bringing different skills and traditions.



**Image 4: Student from Maheshwar at the Handloom School showing one of his saris to the rest of the class.**  
Photo: Ruth Clifford

These case studies will explore how education may be impacting on the weaver-designers' status within the local community and the wider 'craft world' (Venkatesan 2009). Moving from a community shared repertoire of designs for dedicated clients in local markets to contemporary innovations has led to a burgeoning conflict over ownership of new designs, as found in previous research. How do weavers navigate between individual recognition within a global market, and the traditional community politics, social dynamics and expectations they face? As weavers become more aware of the lifestyles of distant markets as well as their own heritage through increasing access to museum collections, through the help of design education, I will explore how interpretations and value of their craft informs new designs, marketing and business planning. These case studies will be a valuable addition to the existing analysis of craft development as discussed above, and will examine how design education may be challenging arguments on authenticity, tradition and the 'global hierarchy of value' (Herzfeld 2004).

Along with interviews, fieldwork notes, photography and video documentation, participant observation in the form of an apprenticeship with a master weaver, will help me to understand the process of learning weaving skills, and participation on the design school courses will help me to understand how design knowledge is transmitted. To provide a basis for this understanding and to plan my methodology, I will refer to Roy Dilley's (Dilley 1999) research with Mabube weavers in Senegal which he carries out partly through learning weaving from a master, and identifies their learning as 'situated peripheral participation'.

Through learning by doing, and embodied knowledge, within the traditional environment, their identity is formed along with their skill. Lave and Wenger's research on this theory of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) and Bordieu's theory of the 'habitus' (Bordieu 1977) will be explored further in relation to my own research.



**Image 5: Weaver Palubhai Tejabhai Jepar and his grandson Aryan in Vananora village, Kutch. Photo: Ruth Clifford**

There is currently little empirical evidence available on weaving practices alongside contemporary design development in India within the material culture, anthropological, or design history literatures. This research will seek to begin bridging this gap. Furthermore, from research carried out so far, it is apparent that design education in rural areas for artisans is scarce in India: I have found only two such institutes – distinct from NGO or government-led initiatives that provide one-off workshops on technological skills, marketing or costing training. Both institutes are relatively new, making this research timely in monitoring their progression and determining whether design education can create a sustainable future for handloom weavers across India.

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