



Raising Awareness of Value: Women and Crafts in India: Impact Report November 2020-July 2023

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In India, the craft sector plays a significant role in providing employment to over seven million artisans, with a notable 56% of them being women. The traditional textile skills are deeply ingrained in the culture of artisan designers, a term coined by Somaiya Kala Vidyalaya for their artisan graduates, and these skills continue to evolve with time. To elevate the value of these indigenous textiles from Gujarat and enhance the livelihoods of crafts makers, the project "Raising Awareness of Value (RAV): Women and Crafts in India" was initiated. This project, funded by the British Council through Crafting Futures India, aimed to support these artisans by promoting product innovation and exploring new marketing strategies. To accomplish this, a collaborative effort was undertaken between a community-based, interdisciplinary research group from India (Pearl Academy) and the UK (Manchester Fashion Institute, MMU, UK). The study focused on nine women and their families who were actively involved in the craft-making process. The overarching objective was to highlight the significance of these artisanal crafts and to empower the female crafts makers and their families. The artisans mainly depended on selling their products in bulk to wholesalers, both within India and abroad. To achieve long-term sustainability and better livelihoods for these artisans, RAV sought to facilitate a process of "learning how to learn" (Ingold, 2013). This approach encouraged active participation in various opportunities and experiences, aimed at equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively market their products. By fostering collaboration, support, and empowerment, the project aimed to enable these women to navigate the market and create a positive impact on their livelihoods.

Initially, prior to the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, the research team had planned to conduct co-creation workshops alongside the craftswomen as part of their project. However, the pandemic disrupted these plans and more importantly, posed a significant threat to the livelihoods of the artisans. The team swiftly adapted their approach to address the challenges posed by the lockdown. They proposed the idea of developing a digital marketing strategy, establishing an authentic social media presence, and creating an online sales channel for the artisans.

To make this possible, the team organized a series of remote online workshops covering topics such as digital marketing, narrative building, photography, image editing, and content creation. Independent textile expert, Lokesh Ghai, helped the team connect with these artisans, all of whom he had personal ties with. The overarching aim was to empower the craft makers and enable them to produce compelling content while sharing their own unique stories. Ultimately, the outcome of the project was intended to be a digital marketing blueprint that could benefit craftspeople and craft collectives.

This article details how the research team employed new collaborative methods to define and co-design (Facer & Pahl, 2017) value identity and brand identity for the group of craft producers. Additionally it reports on the impact of these initiatives two years after the project concluded.

The project involved a diverse range of craft processes, with participants specializing in the following crafts:

- Suf embroidered fabrics, which utilized a delicate satin stitch.
- Complex hand weaving using Kala Cotton grown in the artisans' village.
- Rabari embroidery, incorporating chain stitch and mirror work.
- Bandhani, a highly intricate tie-dye technique, as well as clamp resist dyeing or shibori.

The article follows the social media interventions by three of the nine participating artisan designers. In his introduction Adil Khatri refers to himself as a Bandhani artisan where Laxmi Puwar who specializes in Suf embroidery introduced herself as an artisan designer. During the initial pre-project interview, regarding learning, Adil Khatri elaborated *'According to my family I am actually second generation who is practising this craft as a profession. But the tying work is actually being done in my family since many generations, even I have my great-grandmother doing Bandhini. I learned this craft from my uncle. I'm doing this since 2011'*.

The third participant, Zakiya Khatri is also a Bandhani artisan. When asked how she learnt her practice Zakiya Khatri (2021) explained: *'From the childhood we have (learnt) the mostly (from) our mothers and aunts sitting in the veranda and they are doing their Bandhani, so we always get interested in that. We go near them and see what they are doing, so by looking we learn how to tie.'* The artisanal skills employed by these craftspeople are not only acquired over a lifetime but are also in a constant state of development, reflecting a "living intangible heritage." Traditionally, these exquisite textiles served both domestic purposes and facilitated economic exchange. Despite the influence of their cultural backgrounds on their designs, the artisans' products, which typically include scarves, stoles, and saris, are gradually evolving with time. While they continue to explore new ideas and create innovative products, there is also a strong sense of responsibility to preserve and safeguard their cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2019). These artisan-designers rarely work in isolation; they are integral members of complex communities that often support each other in fulfilling orders and generating new artistic endeavours. The artisans-designers curate new collections on an annual basis, catering to local, national, and international markets. While the Indian market remains crucial to their success, they have also managed to establish a presence in international markets, particularly in America.

The project adopted a co-production approach, which emphasized collaboration and joint efforts to achieve a collective outcome. The researchers and the participants worked in partnership to develop a shared plan for conducting a series of workshops aimed at identifying the craft makers' priorities. The main hypothesis behind the project was that empowering the textile makers with new and direct access to customers would lead to increased income through direct sales. Additionally, the participants expressed a desire to reduce their reliance on middlemen and explore opportunities to sell their goods directly through new retail and social media platforms.

During the initial context setting session, which was the first of the sixteen workshops, the artisans were presented with three styles of Instagram pages: Minimal, Ethnic, and Contemporary (Figure: 1). Afterward, the facilitator asked each participant to express their individual preference regarding the preferred style.

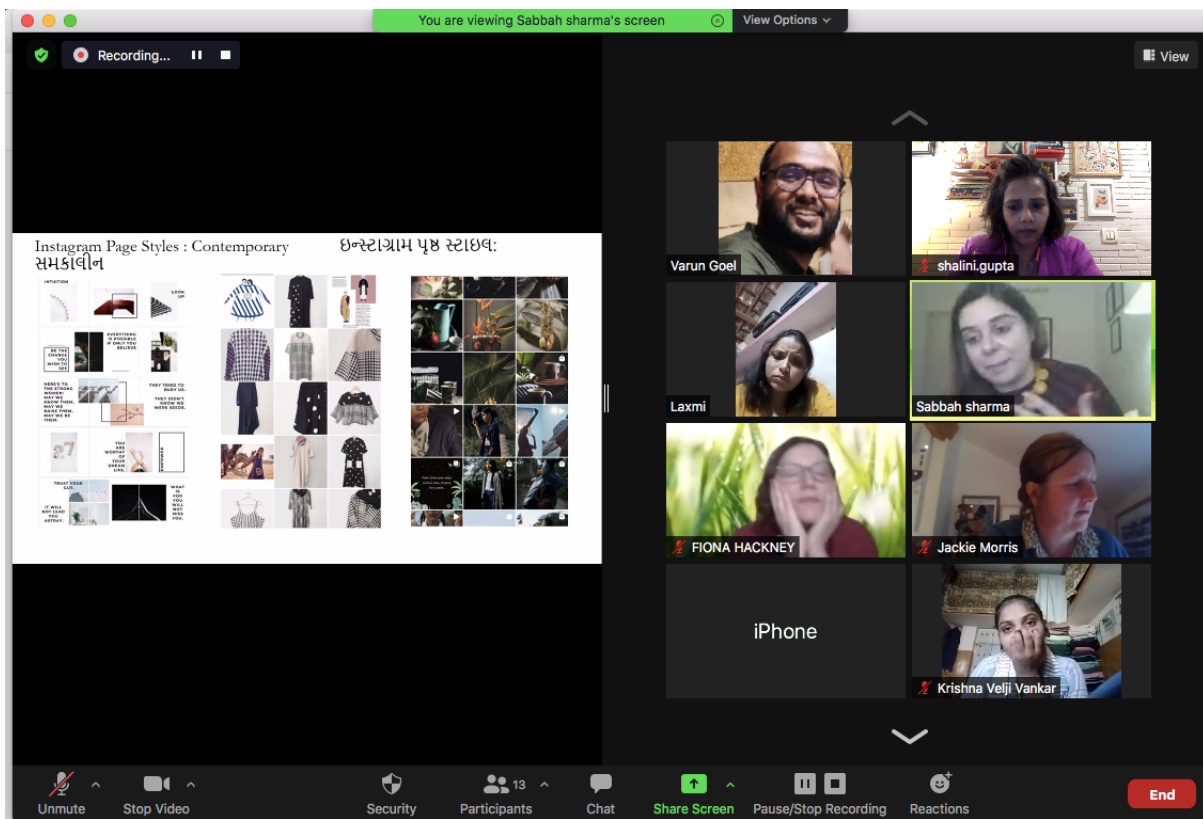


Figure 1: Screen capture from the context setting session.

The project team observed that during the workshop, Adil showed a preference for the ethnic style examples, while Zakiya expressed interest in both the contemporary and ethnic styles. Zakiya's craft was traditional, but she also enjoyed working with contemporary products, which led her to appreciate a blend of the two Instagram feed styles. Adil, on the other hand, found appeal in a feed that combined products and landscapes, particularly drawing inspiration from the captivating geometry of Mughal Architecture, which influenced his designs. The ethnic feed examples resonated with Laxmi, who specifically favored a feed showcasing various uses of the products, as it allowed her to craft a compelling narrative for viewers, drawing them into her work and sparking their imagination about the possibilities of her products.

The team emphasized visual storytelling, focusing on people, the craft-making process, and the final products as key content elements that could be effectively combined to narrate the story of the textile craft. The artisans shared a common inclination to tell the story of their products, connecting the consumer with the cultural and traditional roots of their craft. This alignment of intentions with the makers indicated that the project had taken the right approach in planning the workshop.

During the initial assessment of each artisan's Instagram account, it was noted that Zakiya was the only one with a business account (Figure: 2) in addition to her personal account. The account was named "BairAj," which meant "women's rule," reflecting her

identity as a female craftsperson. The account had a few posts, but lacked explanatory text providing context for the images.

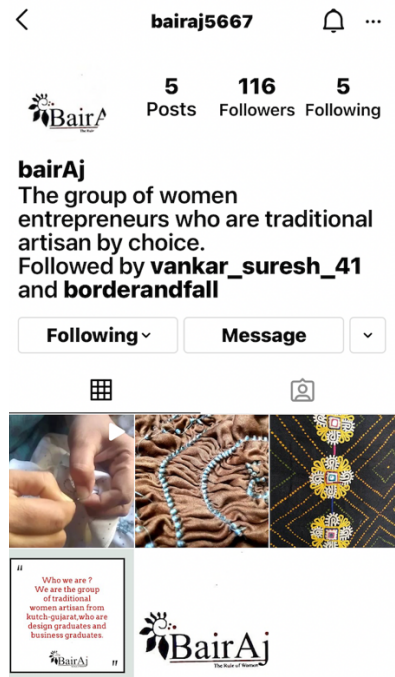


Figure 2: Screen capture of Zakiya Khatri’s Instagram feed (November 2020)

In case of Laxmi Puwar, she had multiple posts of her beautiful products (Figure 3) but again with little explanation. Most posts were of her work, but she did put up a few personal images as well (Figure 4).

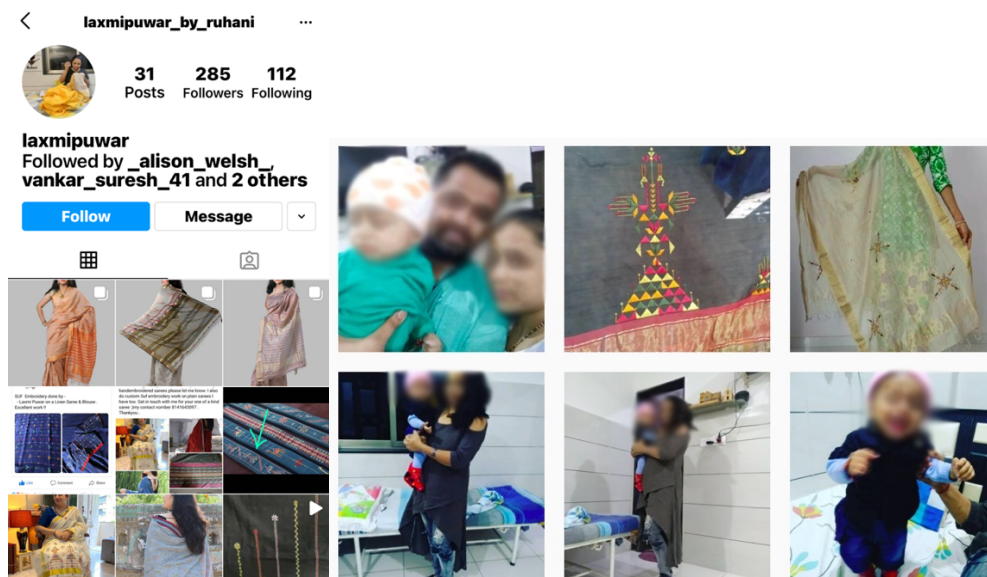


Figure 3 & 4 (Left to right): Screen captures of Laxmi Puwar’s Instagram feed (November 2020)

(Faces have been blurred to maintain privacy)

At the conclusion of the first session, Zakiya expressed her enthusiasm for the

upcoming workshops, recognizing the significance of utilizing social media during the challenging times brought on by the COVID-19 restrictions. While the artisans were skilled in their craft and had experience selling their creations through physical exhibitions, they acknowledged the potential of social media to help them stay relevant, connected with their customers, and establish new connections. Adil proposed an essential idea during the session, suggesting that since most of the artisans were new to Instagram and had not started posting yet, the group could collectively understand what their first post should be and how to make a compelling initial interaction with customers.

During the second session, the focus shifted to defining the artisans' core purpose statement. The objective was to understand what motivated them beyond profit and to identify the key messages they wished to communicate through their Instagram pages. The responses varied, but all the artisans wanted their pages to reflect their specific craft and showcase it as a traditional Indian art form. Zakiya, with her label BairAj, emphasized the importance of highlighting her work with a women-based craft community, as well as showcasing comfortable textiles with a blend of traditional techniques and modern design interpretations. For Adil, drawing inspiration from local Islamic architecture was crucial, and he wanted to underscore the handmade and natural elements integral to his Bandhani practice. He also expressed the need for educating customers about the value of natural dyed products, as they constituted only a small portion of his total sales due to the cost difference.

The subsequent six sessions focused on photography, particularly using mobile phone cameras. Facilitator Aditya Mittal guided the participants through basic framing rules like the "rule of thirds," "frame in frame," and "fill the frame" in the first session. The subsequent sessions allowed the artisans to apply these rules while capturing images of people and products, leading to discussions and improvements in their photography skills. The participants quickly demonstrated increased awareness and started implementing these techniques, as evident from the observed changes in the way they composed their images (Figures 5, 6, and 7). Their inherent talent in making design choices with their products was further enhanced by these new photography techniques, providing them with fresh avenues for their creative decisions.



Figure 5: Zakiya Katri's Images during the workshops



Figure 6: Laxmi Puwar's Images during the workshops

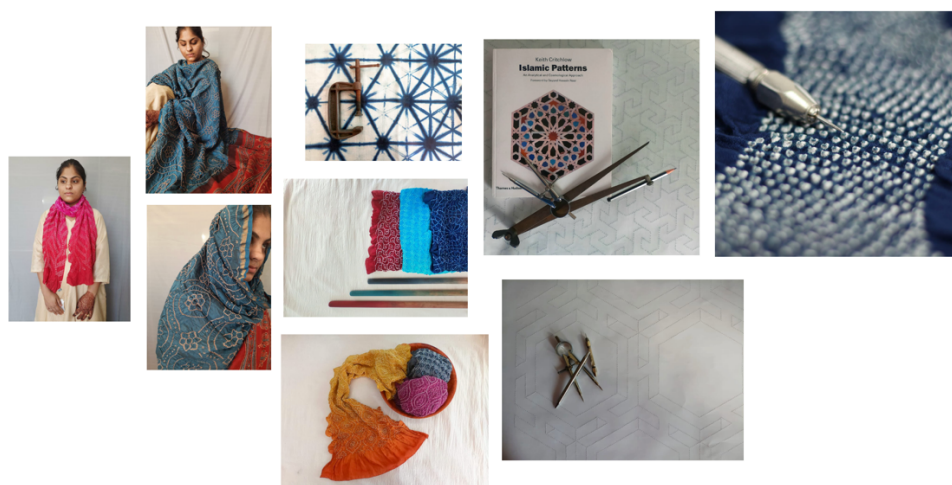
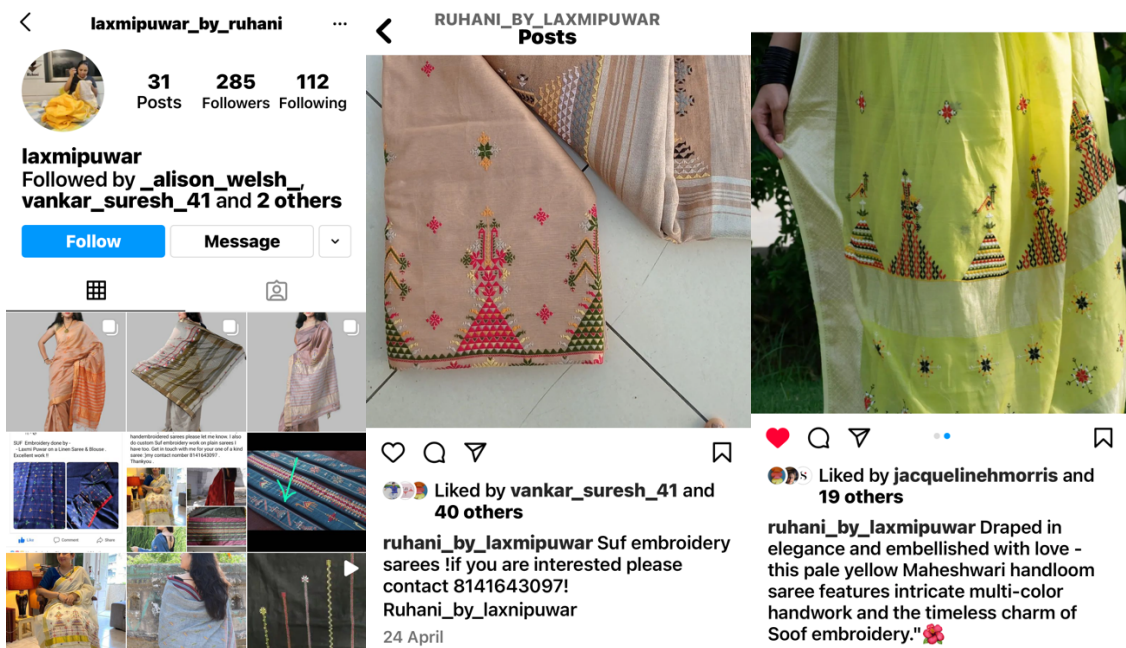


Figure 7: Adil Khatri's Images during the workshops

The primary objective of this project was to enhance the monetary value of crafts. However, during the workshops, it became evident that communicating the intangible cultural and conceptual value of their products held equal significance. The artisan designers learned how to effectively communicate the value of their goods by conveying the essence of their living cultural heritage through evocative text, film, and photography (Figures 8, 9 & 10).



Figures 8, 9, 10 (Left to Right): Screen captures of Laxmi Puwar’s Instagram feed and posts.

Additionally, they had the freedom to create new products in response to feedback direct from the consumer.

Many of the crafts people and artisans, especially the women, work part-time. The work is highly skilled and labour intensive and often undertaken at home with their families. Alongside they support their families with the daily chores of cooking, cleaning, and tending to their children. The project supported the artisans during the lockdown by sending over home studio kits (Figure 11) that comprised studio lights, a backdrop stand, a dress form and a sewing machine.



Figure 11: Zakiya Khatri posing with the home studio kit.

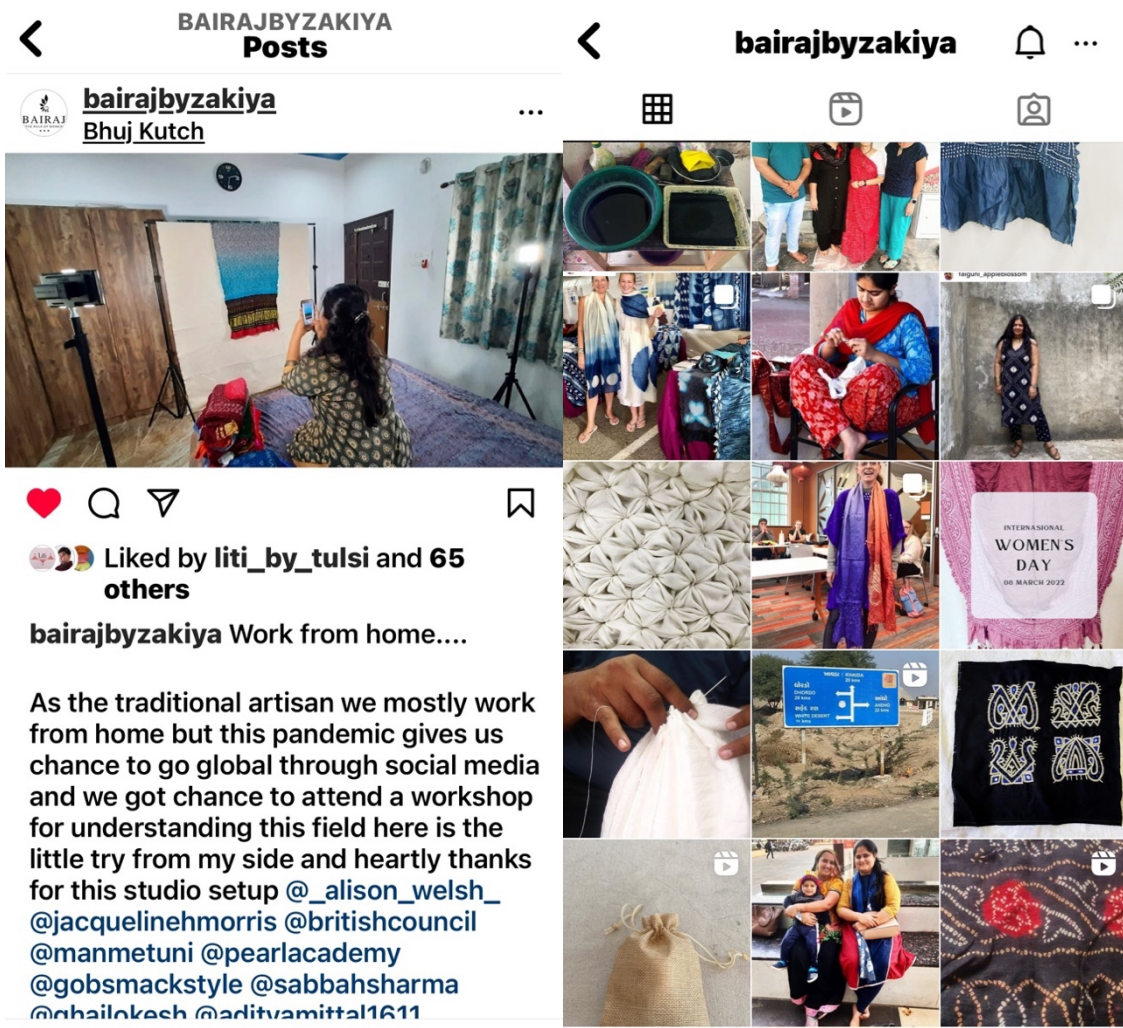


Figure 12 & 13: Screen capture of Zakiya Khatri's Instagram post using the home studio kit and Zakiya Khatri's current Instagram Feed (July 2023)

This encouraged continued engagement with image making and using Instagram in unique ways (Figure 12 & 13). A key outcome of the project was the heightened enthusiasm and dedication of the artisan-designers in embracing novel communication methods, resulting in a notable increase in their autonomy. This shift signifies a transformative future for the fashion industry, wherein the makers themselves gain more control over their livelihoods.

During the project, it became evident that the artisan-designers had previously underestimated the significance of the intricate details of their craft, potentially due to its habitual and familiar nature. Zakiya Khatri said:

'... we have grown up in the culture of the craft, so we don't have much importance of that particular craft, and if we are getting involved with you and the other people who are in this project, so we feel [realise] that this is not a normal thing that this craft is.'

Moreover, the artisans acknowledged that (fashion) designers could present their craft in a distinctive manner, thereby adding value to their work. Following the workshops, they experienced beneficial changes in their approach. They learned how to leverage social media effectively to showcase their creations, gained the competence and self-assurance to enhance the value of their craft, gained a fresh perspective on the significance of paying attention to intricate details, and developed a better understanding of the consumer's perspective. Zakiya Katri said:

'this has given them the confidence because earlier they used to work with bigger designers or other people who used to take their work and kind of present it in this beautiful way, and they used to look at the work and be like you know 'it's our work but why are we not being able to present it the way that they are being able to present it?' ... but after this they feel like even they can present it in that way, they can give it that kind of value that it actually deserves.'

The workshops facilitated a significant expansion in the artisans' understanding of branding, extending beyond merely focusing on the product to encompass the creation of a comprehensive narrative. This process demanded creative thinking and the skilful application of technology to envision and explore various storylines. Additionally, they learned to plan photography and film shoots in new contexts to effectively convey their products' essence. As practitioners, the artisans' reputation relies on the exceptional quality of their products, which is further expressed and reinforced through branding. Hence, the need for effective and appealing branding became evident to capture the essence of what matters most to them, including their craft philosophies and unique making practices. Laxmi Puwar said:

'...at first she thought it was just an image making workshop, but ... what she realised was that [previously] they learned branding in the sense of just their product. What she realised was that that same narrative, that same story, you implement it in your social media and how you present yourself so it becomes an entire narrative altogether, so it gave her a new way of thinking...'

As a result of the workshops, the artisan-designers expressed a newfound enthusiasm for sharing their work creatively. Laxmi Puwar reflected (in the words of the translator)

'there has been a positive change towards creativity. Now they feel a little bit more excited than before, then now when they do a piece or a new design, they want to take a photograph and put it on Instagram.'

The artisan-designers were able to synthesise new styling skills with new photography skills to add value through better composition; Laxmi Puwar said

'styling has also been helpful for them because now they can style their products better while taking a photograph... they can put together a composition better because they know styling.'

The participants recognized the significance of using high-quality photographs to effectively communicate the excellence of their products. However, what became evident during the workshop was the equal importance of accuracy in the construction of the garments. They understood the need to capture and highlight the refined details in their photographs, ensuring that customers are aware of the impeccable craftsmanship and the superior quality of their clothing items. Laxmi Puwar said the technical workshops on detail and pattern cutting gave:

'...them most, I would say, space, where they are seeing tradition, how stitches were done in tradition earlier, and how fine they were and how good they were, and now they are thinking how they can go back to those traditions and bring them back in a newer version, better versions of it. And it gives them more direction, more thinking, more creativity.'

She has recently launched another brand, Sufiyana India (Figure 14) that sells stitched garments embellished with beautiful Suf embroidery and she does this in collaboration with a local fashion designer.

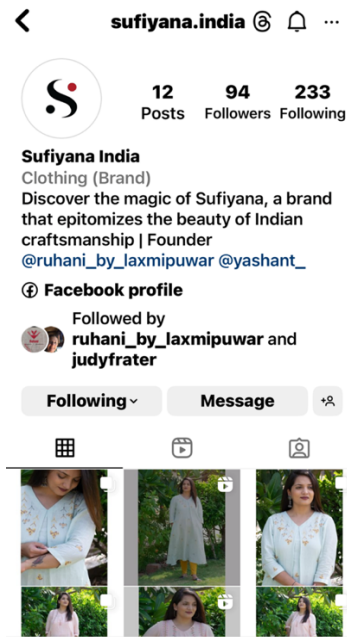


Figure 14: Screen Capture of Instagram feed for the brand Sufiyana India.

The workshops revealed a strong correlation between the artisans' growing confidence in their improved skills and their desire to share their work with others (Figures 15, 16 and 17). They reported numerous benefits gained from the workshops, such as increased confidence in newly acquired skills, proficiency in using social media, enhanced independence, improved business start-up skills, and enriched life experiences through knowledge exchange and receiving feedback from both their peers and the project team.

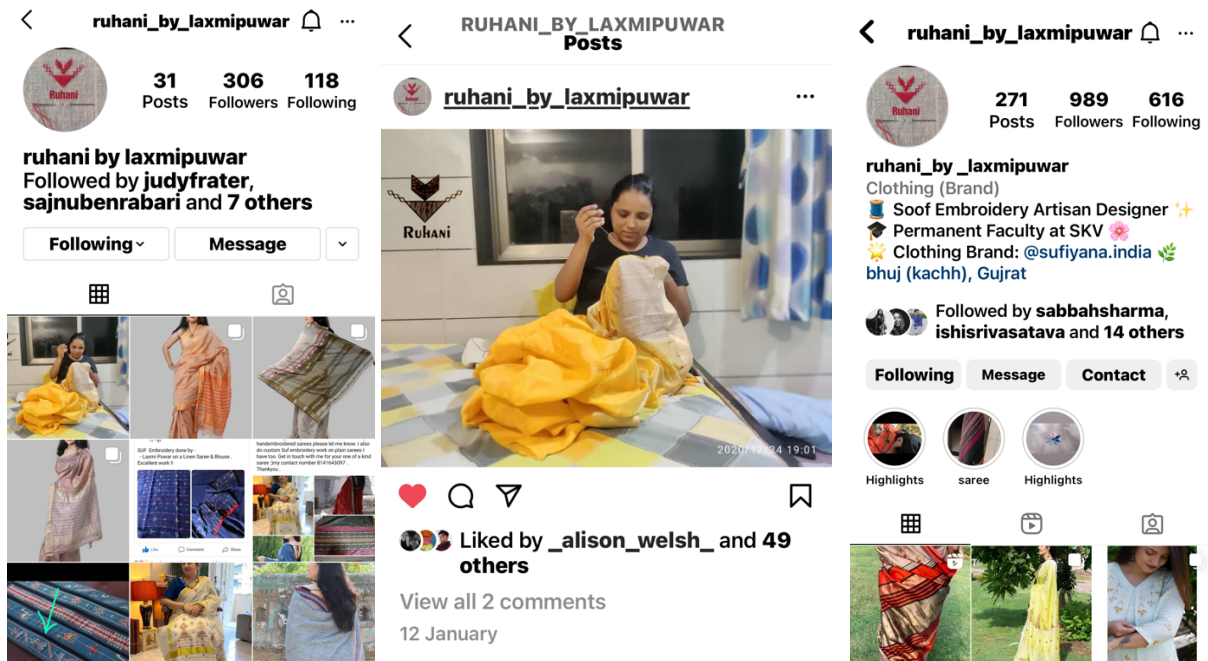
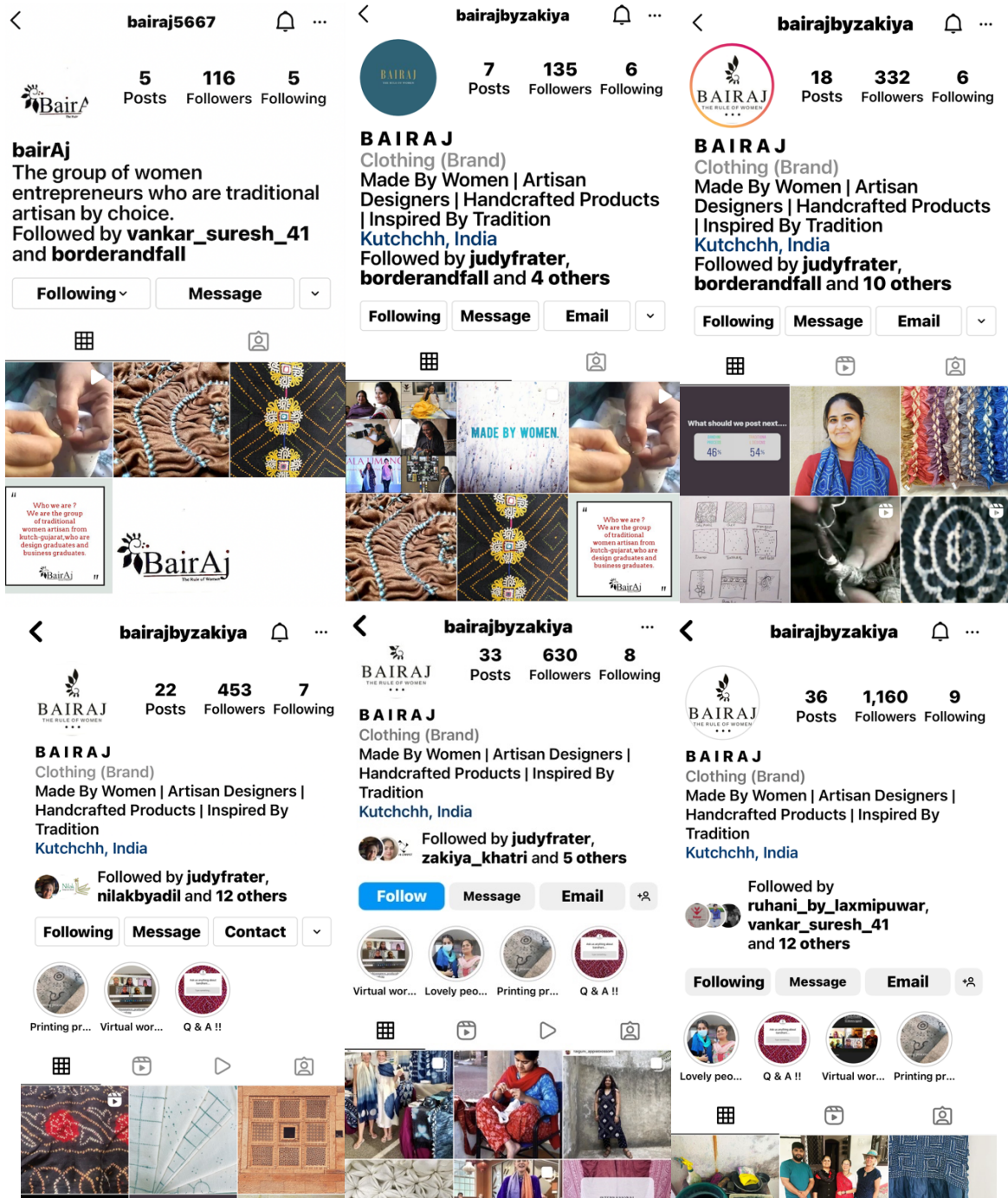


Figure 15, 16 and 17 (Left to right): Screen Capture of Instagram feed for the brand Ruhani by Laxmi Puwar, November 2020 to July 2023.

The artisan-designers displayed great ambition, and they saw sharing these aspirations as a means to elevate their status in the future. They are highly motivated individuals, diligently working every day of the week, engaged in various tasks and collaborating with different groups and networks to achieve their goals. Some of their plans and dreams included empowering a small group of women to establish their own business while managing their households, using social media to showcase their products, revitalizing crafts that are no longer in practice, ensuring the survival and growth of their craft by supporting each other, setting short-term objectives, gaining a deeper understanding of their craft's history, including the origin of motifs and the time it takes to create them, blending traditional and contemporary elements to innovate, and even starting their own workshops. Participating in the project brought about a profound realization among the artisan-designers about the significance of their heritage and culture, leading to a newfound appreciation for their roots. Adil Khatri said:

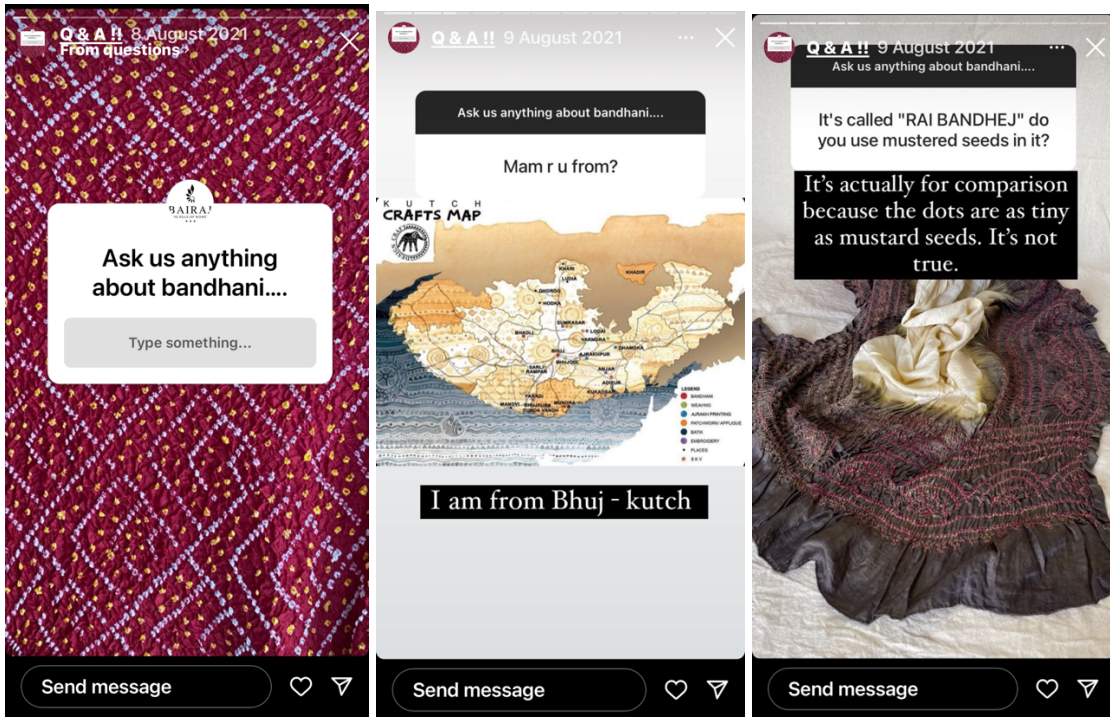
'...after the workshop I realised ... that just product and process is not enough. I mean, you have to deliver, how we live, the region, our culture. So after, especially the videography workshop I would say, we have learned a lot too.'

The artisan-designers demonstrated a clear understanding of how they navigate their heritage, effectively balancing elements of the old and new in their work. They appreciated the importance of preserving certain aspects of their tradition and culture while embracing contemporary influences. By retaining recognizable motifs linked to specific places, they maintained a connection to their heritage and traditions. The series of 16 workshops facilitated the exchange of ideas, skills, and experiences, fostering collaboration between the craftswomen and their families, leading to the generation of new knowledge. With the widespread use of mobile phones and increased accessibility to new media, the quality of these textiles is being showcased and disseminated globally, reaching far beyond the craftswomen's rural villages in Kachchh, Gujarat.

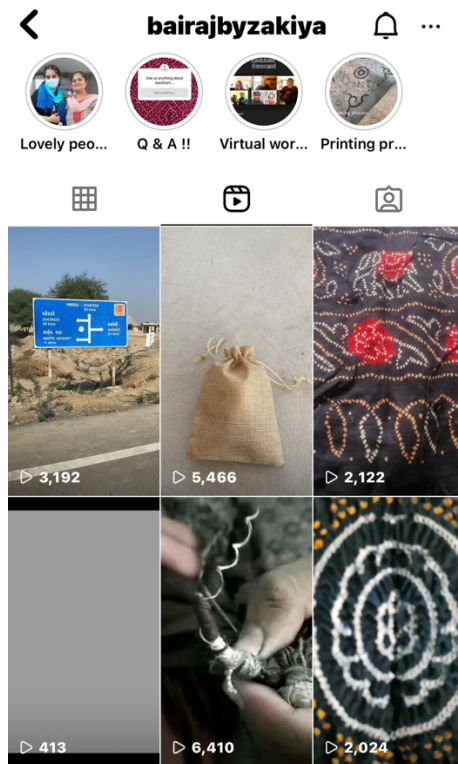


Figures 16, 17, 18 (Top Left to right), 19, 20, 21 (Bottom Left to Right): Screen captures of BaiRaj Instagram feed from November 2020 to July 2023.

The figures 16 to 21, demonstrate the evolution of the Instagram account for the brand BaiRaj, by Zakiya Khatri and a steady increase in followers. She has also begun to use polls (Figure 22, 24, 25) and other features like reels and highlights (Figure 26) to engage with her followers.

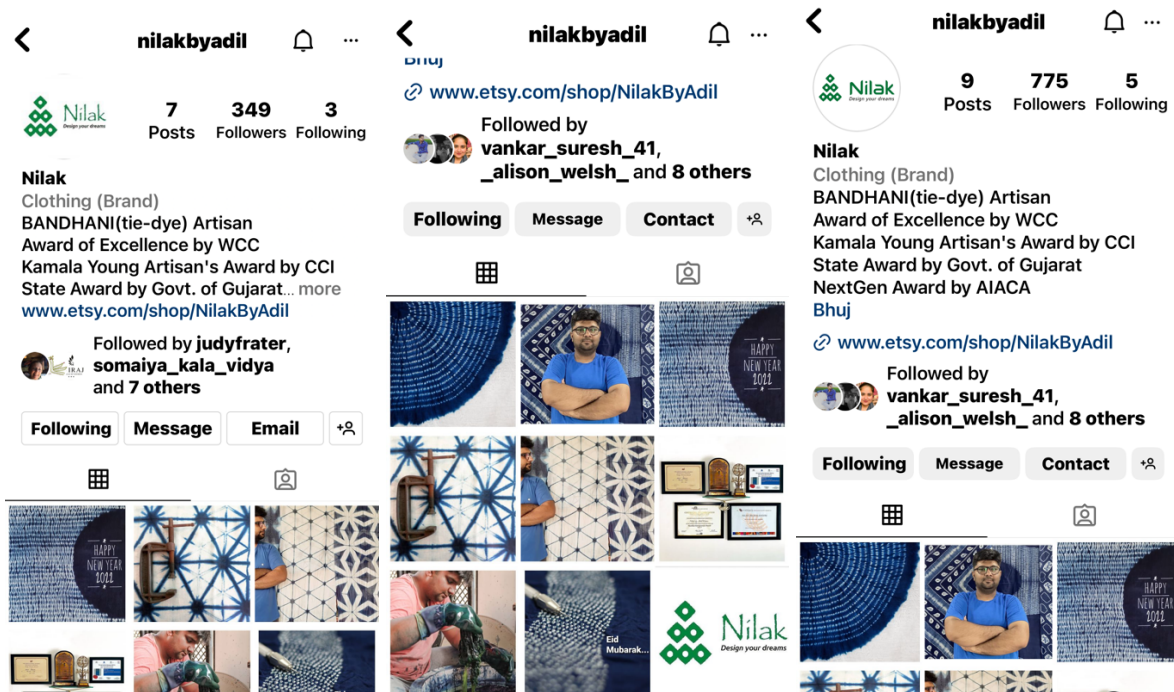


Figures 22, 23, 24 (Left to right): Screen captures of BaiRaj Instagram Highlights (stories), July 2023.



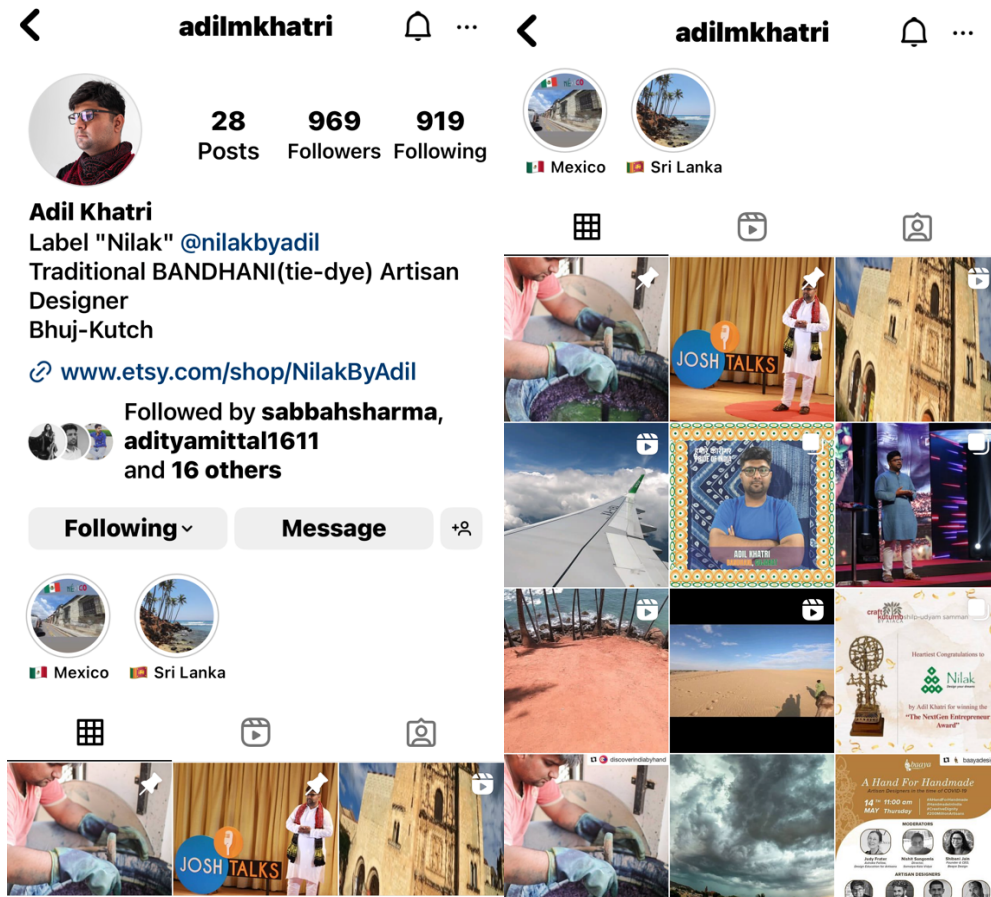
Figures 26: Screen captures of BaiRaj Instagram reels feed from, July 2023.

Adil Khatri is a passionate photographer, and this is evident in his balanced compositions within the individual images as well as in the way he curates his professional brand page, Nilak (Figures 27, 28 and 29). He favors a single colour, indigo, and brings focus to his beautiful Bandhani creations.



Figures 27, 28, 29 (Left to right): Screen caputes of Instagram feed of Nilak, November 2020 to July 2023.

Interestingly he uses his personal page to showcase his awards, travels, inspirations, appearances and collaborations (Figures 30 and 31).



Figures 30 and 31 (Left to Right): Screen captures of Adil Khatri’s Instagram Feed.

Conclusion:

The project "Raising Awareness of Value (RAV): Women and Crafts in India," funded by the British Council's Crafting Futures India initiative, aimed to support and empower artisanal craft makers in Gujarat, India. Through a co-production approach, the research team collaborated with the artisans to develop and deliver workshops that focused on enhancing their skills, marketing capabilities, and storytelling techniques. The results of this endeavor were transformative, as the artisan-designers experienced significant growth, both personally and professionally.

One of the key outcomes of the project was the artisans' newfound enthusiasm for embracing new forms of communication and technology. They learned to harness the power of social media, particularly Instagram, to effectively present their creations and connect with customers directly. This shift marked a crucial turning point for their businesses, as they realized the potential of digital platforms in reaching a wider audience and expanding their market reach.

The workshops also highlighted the importance of storytelling as a means to communicate the cultural and conceptual value of their products. The artisans learned to convey the essence of their living intangible heritage through evocative text, film, and photography. This deeper understanding of storytelling enabled them to connect with

customers on a more profound level, fostering a sense of appreciation for their craft and its rich cultural roots. Through their participation in the project, the artisans developed a profound appreciation for their heritage and culture. They recognized the value of preserving their craft traditions while embracing contemporary influences to create something unique and innovative. The project, it can be said, instilled in them a sense of pride in their cultural heritage, reinforcing their identity as skilled craft makers.

In conclusion, the "Raising Awareness of Value (RAV): Women and Crafts in India" project was successful in fostering collaboration, creativity, and cultural appreciation. It empowered artisan-designers to take control of their livelihoods, paving the way for a promising future in the world of fashion. Through effective storytelling, the artisan-designers were able to elevate the status of their handmade textiles, making them more appealing to a global audience. With enhanced marketing capabilities and access to new media, these high-quality textiles have found their way to international markets, leaving a lasting impact on the craftspeople's rural villages in Gujarat, India, and beyond. The success of this project hopes to serve as an inspiring model for future initiatives aimed at supporting and empowering artisans worldwide. By recognizing and celebrating the cultural heritage and skills of traditional craftspeople, we can create a more inclusive and sustainable fashion industry, where makers are valued, and their stories are heard and appreciated by a global audience.

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