Weaving Threads of Art & Identity: A Kachchh Experience

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Weaving in Kachchh sustained over centuries of reciprocal relationships between the weavers and maldhari pastoral communities. Photo credit: Rucha Chitnis

Khatri Jahangir Lateef is a twelfth generation block printer. The imprints of his intricate designs irrevocably connect him to his forefathers, who perfected an art form that spans centuries. Khatri gently dips an engraved wood block into a liquid dye and presses on a cloth with deft ease. "My hope is that our future generations continue this craft happily for the world to enjoy," said Khatri, who joined other artisans—weavers, musicians and Ajrakh block printers at a Vikalp Sangam gathering in Kachchh this July to highlight sustainable alternatives in the region. Vikalp Sangam means a confluence of alternatives in Hindi. In the face of devastating poverty, inequalities and ecological destruction, Vikalp Sangam offers a storytelling platform of viable alternatives that are strengthening ecological sustainability and social and economic justice.
Khatri Jahangir Lateef is a twelfth generation block printer from Dhamadka. Photo credit: Rucha Chitnis

Kachchh is the cradle of distinct art forms birthed by a long history of reciprocal relationships between pastoralists, farmers, weavers and other artisans. The unique ecology of the landscape, and even the stars in the cosmos that guided nomadic communities as they traversed a desert, inspired designs for the ancient craft of embroidery and Ajrakh printing. Weaving, silversmithy, leatherwork, block printing and pottery are some of the many crafts that mark the ingenuity of local artisans in Kachchh, which is also India's largest district.

The Kachchh convergence of Vikalp Sangam illuminated how identity is deeply intertwined with culture, art and communities that preserve these ancient traditions. We learned that women are in the center of the art form of embroidery. “Embroidery was meant for personal use, and it became a benchmark for the skills of a young woman,” shared Punit Soni of Kachchh Qasab and Crafts, a group that works to preserve the tradition of embroidery and enhance the livelihoods of women artisans.

Kachchh Mahila Vikas Sanghathan (KMVS) members also joined the sangam and shared their philosophy of collective empowerment, where rural women themselves lead the change processes. Incidentally KMVS was also founded to holistically empower women artisans and give them a voice to express their creativity.

The sangam revealed how the ancient tradition of weaving is also linked with ancient indigenous seeds. Members of Khamir, a group that works to strengthen artisanal traditions of Kachchh, shared their initiative to revive kala cotton, an indigenous variety of cotton. Described as “old world cotton,” this rain fed crop is grown organically and is considered resilient. Khamir began an initiative to revive kala cotton to sustain the livelihoods of farmers and artisans in the face of market fluctuations. “When kala cotton came to the market, people felt something new and unique was introduced. Now we are hand stitching again,” shared one weaver at the sangam.

“The weaving heritage is intrinsic to the way of life of the people of Kachchh. The traditional fabric they wear is part of their identity,” said Juhi Pandey, Director of Khamir. “The embroideries have stories of their life and culture. We have to educate consumers of these stories of the artisan communities.”

The Kachchh sangam brought to life the web of interdependency between weavers and maldhari nomadic communities, who had settled in the Banni grasslands in the Rann of Kachchh. “The Rabari herders gave their wool to the weavers, who would make their shawls and quilts in exchange for a portion of the wool that they would keep for themselves. No money was exchanged,” shared Vankar Shamji Vishram. Shamji hails from a multigenerational family of weavers from Bhujodi, a village that has become synonymous with the artistry of textiles of Kachchh.
Vankar Shamji Vishram hails from a multigenerational family of weavers from Bhujodi, a village that has become synonymous with the artistry of textiles of Kachchh. Photo credit: Rucha Chitnis

Shamji exemplified how artisans in Kachchh were keeping alive their traditional arts and livelihoods over centuries in the face of modernization and mechanization. In the 1980s, synthetic acrylic fibers arrived in Kachchh and disrupted the use of indigenous kala cotton and wool. “Weaving organic cotton is not easy and medium skilled weavers began to switch to acrylic,” said Shamji. The diverse voices of artisans in the Kachchh sangam underscored how preservation of traditional arts is linked with cultural survival. Recognizing this, civil society groups have started schools to mentor the next generation of weavers and other artisans. One such school is Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya. “Nearly 200 children have finished the course,” said Shamji with pride.

Artisan schools, such as Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, are also linking with premier Indian design institutes, like the National Institute of Design, to build bridges between artisans and designers. We learned that Karigarshala, a school for artisans started by Hunnarshala Foundation, is training youth dropouts, ages 16-18, in carpentry and masonry using sustainable materials, such as stone, earth, thatch and bamboo. Sustainable housing is also linked with the identity of pastoral communities like the Jat, whose traditional ‘pakka’ house is made by women from grass. “We will not leave our pakka; it’s part of our identity, like the clothes that we wear,” explained Aga Khan Savlani during a dialogue on sustainable housing.

An artist gives a demonstration of Jodia Pawa, two flutes that are played simultaneously. Photo credit: Rucha Chitnis

Music, too, flourished as a vibrant art form in the vast arid landscape in Kachchh. Maldhari communities in the Banni grasslands have a rich tradition of folklores, dances and music. Sufism influenced Kachchhi music as pastoralists traversed from Persia to Sindh to the Rann. Two artists gave a demonstration of Jodia Pawa, double flutes that are played simultaneously. “Music is a vibrant force that needs to be set free,” said one of the speakers. Sur shalas (music schools) were started to keep this heritage alive in Kachchh. “Money and capitalism has diluted the music. Today 10% of people understand the music, and 90% think they do,” shared another artist.

Industrialization rapidly accelerated in Kachchh after the 2001 earthquake, with the development of a port and manufacturing industries. This led to the loss of grazing lands and livelihoods of farmers. Preservation of arts in the face of modernization and market economy emerged as a thread of the Kachchh sangam. Shamji offered a vikalp (alternative) to this vexation: “My father never considered weaving as a dhanda (business), and asked us to weave with our hearts and not just look at profit margins,” he shared. However, Shamji acknowledges that this sentiment might not be echoed by all youth in the Bhujodi community: “Those who have studied a little think they are weaving today, because there is no other alternative,” he shared.
As worldviews collide, the Kachchh sangam exemplified how people were sparking hope in the face of looming threats to traditional arts: Advocates for traditional arts and artisans are working hard to connect the dots between artisans, designers and consumers; schools for weavers and other karigars are deepening pride among youth for traditional skills; and a new museum, the Living and Learning Design Center, is shining light on the brilliance of embroidery and textiles of maldhari communities of Kachchh. The sangam revealed that preserving culture and identity hinged on valuing and celebrating artisans, who are the tenacious custodians of art forms that have sustained over centuries. “After all, these traditions survived because communities kept them alive,” reflected one artisan.

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