

## **Design Matters:**

### **A Discussion Between Artisan Designers of Kutch and Craft Experts of India**

Judy Frater, Founder Director, and Nilanjan Mondal, Programme Coordinator of Somaiya Kala Vidya

On 24 October 2016, the artisan design students of Somaiya Kala Vidya in Kutch participated in the final jury of their eleven-month course. Jury members included world renowned designer Ritu Kumar, Anuradha Kumra, senior designer for Fabindia, Gita Ram, Chairperson, Crafts Council of India, and Reena Bhatia, Design Faculty at Maharaja Sayajirao University Baroda. That evening, SKV held a seminar for the artisan design community and this expert panel. Following is a translation of the discussion.

#### **From Handicraft to Design Craft: Marketing Tradition in the Contemporary World**

##### **Judy Frater, Founder Director, SKV-**

We started SKV to take a program to an institute, because design education is important for artisans. We have reached an era where craft is in demand, but artisans, whose heritage is craft traditions, are becoming laborers. So in our education we aim to bring value to art and artisan. When we held our final presentation I saw hope in artisans and their families. As Aslam realized, craft is not just livelihood. It is cultural heritage. When artisans value this, so will the world.

There are many challenges to bringing tradition to the appropriate market. I hope this evening we can take full benefit of our highly experienced panel with an open discussion between artisans and jury.

##### **Shweta Dhariwal, Designer and Moderator-**

Let's begin with fashion. How important for an artisan is an understanding of trend forecast?

##### **Anuradha Kumra, Senior Designer, Fabindia -**

I personally feel that it is very important for an artisan to have a fair idea what is going in the fashion world. I am not saying that artisans should follow trends blindly. They are a guideline. If artisans can take some direction or inspiration it is useful.

Fashion is entertainment. Everything is in fashion. You just need to interpret properly. Artisans are now going to foreign countries and participating in different exhibitions. Everywhere people have different taste. You have to know the particular market or customers you are targeting, and what to include and what not to. When we buy products for Fabindia for example, we keep in mind that West Bengal's taste is different from Ahmedabad's. Trend forecasts can help you understand these variations.

##### **Ritu Kumar, Designer -**

I agree with Anuradha to some extent, but at the same time I also feel that fashion, colour etc. does not work in the craft sector. Whatever you are making or producing has to be appealing.

##### **Reena Bhatia, Faculty Maharaja Sayajirao University-**

You have traditional knowledge but if you are not able to make products according to market demand, you will never succeed. Taste changes. We did a project with weavers of Paitani saris. They had not innovated and were not getting enough work. We kept the same colours and fabric but changed some layouts and the saris sold.

**Shamji Vishramji Siju, weaver and SKV Advisor-**

Based on my experience, I feel that we should balance fashion and tradition. Previously we used to make dhabla/ blankets. Now we are making stoles, dupattas, shawls, etc. But all are based on our traditional design. Market demand changes every year. If you focus only on fashion, two or three years later you may lose the market, but if you keep a balance of fashion and tradition, it will give you decent business for a long time.

**Laxmi Kalyanji Puvar, suf embroiderer and SKV Faculty-**

What do customers want in suf embroidery? I made butterfly motifs in suf embroidery. Customers at an exhibition in Mumbai did not like them because they looked like machine embroidery and were modern. I explained my concept and my work. But customers advised me to stick to tradition.

**Gita Ram, Chairperson, Crafts Council of India-**

If your design is good, colours are good, the quality of the fabric is good and you are in the right market then you do not need to think so much. Your product will sell.

**Laxmi Kalyanji Puvar-**

I understand that, but I still want to know exactly what the market wants?

**Ritu Kumar-**

The Market does not know what it wants! You have to show it what it wants!

**Dahyalal Kudecha, weaver and SKV Faculty-**

We always talk about customers' demands. What about artisans' desires? Do we ever think what artisans actually want?

**Anuradha Kumra-**

I would like to point out that you artisans actually brought market-oriented product innovation. I joined Fabindia in 2008 and that time there was a huge demand for short kurtas. The demand for dupattas was going down. You brought us stoles with the designs and colours of dupattas and it worked out tremendously. So you innovated on the product using a balance of market demand and tradition. Fabindia is proud to give you a platform where you can showcase your designs, your traditions, and your creativity.

**Juned Ismail Khatri, Ajrakh Printer-**

Originally only three ajrakh products were made: a lungi, a turban and a shoulder cloth. Now you will find at least twenty ajrakh products. Allah has given us brains. We just need to use them. If you know how to balance between tradition and the fashion world, you do not need to think about how to get an order.

**Adil Mustak Khatri, Bandhani Artist-**

Should craft be mass-produced? If the same design is replicated in 2,000 pieces or 3,000 or meters is it going in the right direction?

**Reena Bhatia-**

If you are the creator of the design and are replicating it without compromising the quality of the product, it's fine. It is good that a large number of people will get products you have designed. That will help you create your own brand, your own identity in the market.

**Shweta Dhariwal-**

It is many artisans' dream to work with Fabindia. But considering Fabindia's large-scale production, small-scale artisans can't even think of it. What possibilities do artisans with limited production capacity have?

**Anuradha Kumra -**

In weaving we started with Shamjibhai and gradually ordered from other artisans who had limited production capacity. We did this with other crafts too. In Fabindia, you are all welcome. We understand that all products can't be mass-produced. We send some products to only 30 out of 200 stores, and some products to only 5 stores. We have many inspiring stories. One woman from Chennai started working with Fabindia in 2008, with only two sewing machines. Today she has 150 machines and her annual turnover is 6 crore.

**Reena Bhatia-**

Have patience. Ritu Kumar is now a brand but she had to struggle forty-five years. Forty-five years ago the road was not as smooth as it is now. You can use e-commerce, Facebook and other social network sites, create a blog, a website.

**Soyab Abdulkarim Khatri-**

I have been working with e-commerce sites and I have a personal website. But I still feel that I have not been able to promote my brand.

**Reena Bhatia-**

Don't try to rush. Keep doing good work. If your products are good they will automatically promote your brand.

**Gita Ram-**

And I will invite you to exhibitions in Chennai, Hyderabad and Karnataka!

**Abdulaziz Alimamad Khatri, Bandhani Artist-**

How can we solve the problem of design copying or stealing? For example, screen printers are printing block print designs in huge quantities. What kind of designs should we make so that they can't be copied?

**Ritu Kumar-**

I know this is a common problem in every craft. But keep in mind that people who are copying your design will not be able to make products with the same quality as you make. People copy because your work is good and there is a demand in the market. If you have nothing in your hand, nobody will copy you. But copying is actually diluting. If your craft is diluted, what is its

future? Don't be de-motivated. You have design education and lots of creativity. This is your intellectual property. Someone can steal your design but no one can steal your intellectual property. Keep going forward, make new designs.

**Gulam Husain Umar Khatri, Bandhani Artist and SKV Advisor-**

As a traditional artisan, I feel that whatever happens, we should not lose our confidence. We have to be strong. As a real artisan we should make only quality products. Never compromise quality.

**Khalid Usman Khatri-**

What should I do if, for example, I am asking Rs 500 for a particular product and the customer says Rs 450? If I do not sell it in that price he will go to another artisan.

**Anuradha Kumra; -**

There is no right answer. You need to take decisions individually. I would say customers need to be more sensitive, and artisans should avoid competition among themselves. Otherwise it will be dirty.

**Khalil Usman Khatri, Ajrakh Printer-**

We all know that Khadi Bhandar is a central government organization. A few months ago I bought some khadi from Khadi Bhandar, Bhuj. I had some doubts about the quality. Judyben confirmed that was not khadi. How can we find quality materials when we can't trust a government agency?

**Gita Ram -**

This is really unfortunate. There is a lot of corruption. The only recourse is for you to be knowledgeable and careful when you buy materials.

**Shweta Dhariwal-**

Besides quality materials, what else do artisans need to consider to become successful in business?

**Reena Bhatia-**

I feel that they should think of environmental sustainability. If artisans can focus on water use, how to store the rainwater and recycle dye baths, and even set up solar panels in workshops it will help to promote businesses and brands. Sustainability can be a selling point for products.

**Shweta Dhariwal-**

How can the government provide for craft development?

**Ritu Kumar-**

The government has a handicrafts development board, money, power, and facilities, and can assist craft development. But its role should be restricted to dispensing money and providing facilities to artisans. It should not interfere in design and marketing. I really object that the government calls for tenders in hiring designers. They select the designer who gives the lowest budget! Tell me how many good designers would apply in that situation? This has an adverse effect.

**Sandeep Issrani, English Teacher, SKV-**

I feel that there is a lack of awareness about craft. We could increase awareness by launching a campaign about SKV's work in schools, colleges and other institutes. Our design and business graduates can help us spread awareness.

**Gita Ram-**

That would be a good direction, and I would like to tell you that in the South- in Hyderabad, Karnataka and Chennai- there are already craft teachers in every school.

**Renna Bhatia -**

If I had never tasted jalebi I could never choose jalebi as my favorite sweet. The same is true with craft. If people do not know craft, how could we expect them to buy it? We have to increase customer awareness of craft.

**Shamji Vishramji Siju-**

For the last few years we have already been bringing students from schools and colleges in Bhuj and Madhapur to Bhujodi. They spend the whole day observing the process of weaving and go back and share with their parents.

**Shweta Dhariwal-**

SKV is doing artisan-to-artisan outreach, with artisan designers of Kutch guiding weavers from Bagalkot and embroiderers from Lucknow. Maybe SKV could do a project where artisan designers and faculty work with students of schools and colleges in Kutch.

**Lokesh Ghai, Designer and SKV Governing Council Member -**

How can artisan designers and urban designers work together?

**Ritu Kumar-**

This is a very important question for the next century. When an artisan becomes an artisan designer, s/he can develop designs and provide them to the world. I understand that many of the young generation feel that craft has a limited future. But you are the future of traditional craft. You have a tremendous resource. Do not dilute it.

**Shweta Dhariwal-**

Let's hear from this year's soon-to-graduate artisan designers. What was your experience this year?

**Mustafa Khalid Khatri, Ajrakh Printer-**

I had been block printing for two years. I did not want to be a job worker. I wanted to move ahead. The design course at SKV really brought changes in my attitude and thinking level. I gained the knowledge to describe my work and sell my products in the high-end market. SKV helped me open my mind.

**Razak Anvarali Khatri, Bandhani Artist-**

SKV provided me confidence to make different kinds of designs and target the high-end market. I can play with design principles and hope people will like my work.

**Poonam Arjan Vankar, Weaver-**

I have been weaving for the last 20 years. I have participated in various exhibitions. SKV helped me become more confident. Now I can see a bigger dream. If we do our craft well, there is great scope. We can be more successful than if we do a job.

**Reena Bhatia-**

Can we all make a promise? How many of you will promise that you will teach your craft to your children?

*(Here, the entire audience enthusiastically raises their hands.)*

**Abdulaziz Alimamad Khatri-**

I have the answer to your question. Today I came here with my daughter. I am a design graduate, but I never told my daughter to learn craft. Rather, I always respect her individual preferences. But now she is interested in craft, and she is learning bandhani from me. So it is a live example. We have already started the process.