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Of Identity and Innovation: Developing a pedagogy for new age crafts

Craft is a complex, multifaceted entity that eludes a singular definition. Owing to the integral aspect of making, it is often compared with art and design both as a discipline of study as well as a field of practice. The discussion on craft has ranged from seeing craft, art and design as a unified concept (Vyas 91-94) on the one hand, to considering craft as a distinct field that overlaps with the other two fields (Niedderer and Townsend). Any enterprise associated with craft, whether research, practice or learning, therefore becomes a complex pursuit demanding interdisciplinary approaches.

This study investigates the development of craft pedagogy in and for the current times. Designing/developing a pedagogy first requires dissecting the layers of the subject to understand its construct and interrelationship of its components. In dissecting the entity called craft, the layer of identity appeared as the crucial outermost layer that holds all the other layers together. This study focuses on developing a pedagogy that fosters innovation and identity building through an artisan oriented approach. It aims at developing methods to channelise the artisan's individual tacit knowledge and address the context they inhabit. This research is embedded in a live project - ANUSHILP, that is aimed at understanding, upskilling and upgrading the craft practices of Rajpipla, a tribal belt in the state of Gujarat, India.

India is well known for its crafts that are representative of its culture and traditions. Craft is also the second largest source of employment in the country after agriculture. (Crafts Council of India) For a country with a large population, that seems promising for the sector. Despite this fact, the status and perception of craft in the current times, is in a confused state. Craft traditions have been intertwined with the living patterns of the people in India. A loss of these traditions is not only a loss of livelihood but also a loss of flavor and character from the daily lives. The status quo of India's thriving craft practices was first marred by the colonial rule that suppressed them on account of being rooted in the past to establish their domination based on the 'progressive' idea of industrialisation. Since then the struggle has been on to revive the crafts from a condition of depletion and marginalisation. Through government policies and schemes, through craft bazaars and fairs across the world, through brands that have repackaged craft products and brought them under their umbrella of patronage, through institutions that impart training in craft skills; these multifarious efforts have needed to address the perception crafts (Tyabji 103-116) in order to create a demand for their products and thereby cause their economic upliftment. Despite these persistent efforts since the time of independence, craft is at a loss, owing to loss in quality caused by high demand of craft objects as souvenirs (Das and Hasija 11-16) and the disenchantment felt by the younger generation of artisan families towards craft as a career option. The craft person is well respected but is still perceived as a village dweller who is distant from the modern education and sophisticated ways

of the progressive world. As a result they have been patronized and are not perceived as drivers of change and progress.

Amid this landscape of craft in India, this research (through the conduit of the ANUSHILP project) addresses a unique and localized scenario. Nestled in the valleys of the Narmada river, the Rajpipla district of Gujarat, India, is a region abundant in nature and natural resources that are protected by the government. Due to the limitation of setting heavy industries in the region and perishing of indigenous vocations caused by displacement of the local community, small scale industries, specifically craft, have been seen as a potential source of improved livelihood for the local people. The existing craft practices either cater to the specific needs of the regional lifestyle or have been newly adopted from the other regions and craft traditions of the country. While sufficiently fulfilling the local needs, a lack of an extroverted expression of regional identity limited the widespread relevance and demand of these crafts and therefore their potential of being economically lucrative.

Traditional and established Indian craft practices have well defined methods, techniques and vocabulary that have evolved within dedicated communities over generations of practice. The craft practice is itself the vocation as well as the learning medium. This opportunity of consolidating a craft practice as an organized enterprise presented by this project, opened up the fundamental questions within the realm of craft research. The initial craft and skill mapping exercise revealed that the artisans were skilled at their craft but lacked an anchor that aligned their skills to a common motivation. Although the artisans possessed the skill of designing objects to serve function, this lack of alignment also impeded innovation suited for progressing times. The primary question was that beyond serving functional needs what is the impetus that drives craft practice. Also, for a new craft practice that is not built on tradition, how can its training and propagation be sustained within a community?

In reflection to these questions, the project established the unique methods of a craft along with the cultural expressions rooted in the context of the artisan as the constituent elements of identity, that holds a craft practice together. It is also the aspect of identity that drives innovation as it governs what can be changed and what needs to be held constant when appropriating the craft practice for changing times. The need for artisan oriented pedagogical intervention was identified, that would help the community to build and sustain an identity while having the spirit to innovate. This approach necessitated the adoption of means and methods of working on different aspects of the making process. This is where we turn towards Design pedagogy. Design pedagogy uses abstraction as a means of isolating different aspects of a design entity to study them in depth. This is counterintuitive to traditional means of transmission of crafts knowledge which is why these methods needed to be altered to allow for the artisans sensibilities and world views to play an active part. This paper discusses the adaptation of exercises of abstraction, color interaction, narrative development and pattern making, that are commonly used in design pedagogy, into a hybrid teaching method that acknowledges the intuitive and subjective responses of the apprentice artisan that emerge from their socio-cultural and physical context.

The project is currently in the initial stages of testing this pedagogical approach with the artisans of Rajpipla through a residency program organized at the Anant National University campus situated in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The paper aims to discuss the artisans' response to this teaching method and identifies the crucial points of change. The ANUSHILP model aims that the artisans trained under the residency program further train people from their community and establish a continuum that makes their craft practice thrive and take root in their context while being independent of institutional affiliation. In the further stages this research will not only study how these methods are adapted by the artisans, but will also involve them as scholars of craft.

Keywords:

Craft pedagogy, craft research, Identity, tacit knowledge

Works Cited

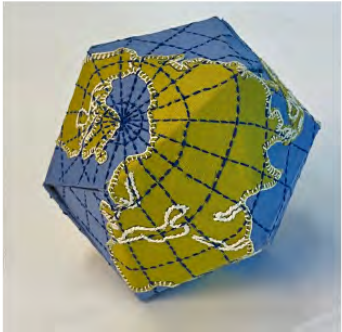
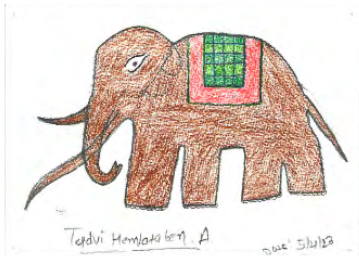
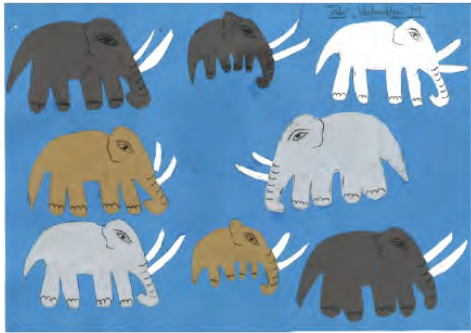
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DDR Statement

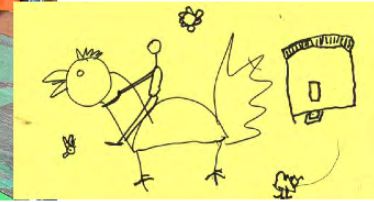
Craft Research is gaining legitimacy as a discipline the world over. Moving ahead from historical and ethnographic research that emerges from the documentation of existing craft practices, newer dimensions of research can be added to the gamut in the form of practice based approaches. The need of the hour is also to include the craftsperson/artisan as an active contributor to the formal processes of knowledge production and dissemination in the field of crafts. Acknowledging the fact that craftspeople of today are locally rooted but globally aware, the purview of craft pedagogy needs to expand in its purview.

The project presented in this study has been designed to initiate this change that can be taken forward by craftspeople themselves. The initial testing of a hybrid pedagogy was undertaken as a part of an artisans' residency program organized at Anant National University, Ahmedabad, India. The program involved an informal process of doing things together as opposed to one-way communication from the trainer to the trainee. Design jargon was replaced by local terminology and the use of technology such as mobile phones (available with them) and digital fabrication (available at institute) was built into the exploration process. The resident artisans and the design students of the university used the same workshop and makerspace resulting in free exchange of knowledge and spontaneous collaborations.

Illustrations



process of experimentation in color composition, pattern making - applique work



Understanding the culture of artisans and making it part of pedagogy - Bamboo craft