

Foregrounding the Value of Traditional Indian Crafts: Voices from the Fringe



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Abstract Craft in India is as old as the civilization itself and contributes to preserving art, culture, identity and storytelling (Dayinee and Priya 2020). The rich textiles tradition of India, with an abundance of natural resources, diverse climatic conditions and indigenous communities, have contributed to its ubiquitous and unique craft heritage. They are laden with perspectives of wellbeing and co-existence, a living heritage, expressing beauty and culture, community happiness and sustainability [1]. Indigenous communities create shared experiences within, socially transiting traditional values and identity associated with craft practices, from one generation to the next [2]. Madhavi Gandhi in her talk states, ‘All objects have a story to tell, and with objects that are handmade, the stories are personal, sometimes emotional and largely cultural’ [3]. Different crafts in India communicate unique varied embodied experiences and express emotional values. Additionally, Indian craft has emerged as a major export in recent years, proving its potential to meet global consumer demands [4]. However, India faces a paradoxical situation with reference to its crafts [2]. Craft here is often pushed outside everyday fashion practice, making going to market a challenge for artisans. Although crafts do not exist in isolation to mainstream fashion, they are often linked to other parts of the creative economy and are accompanied by a sense of pessimism, perceived as representative of a ‘sun set sector’ [2] and sometimes equated with manual labour. Contrarily, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) posits that this industry has massive potential for income generation by fostering its cultural assets (Dayinee and Priya 2020). However, as documented in the Sustainability of Rural Artisans journal, India continues to see large scale migration of many craft communities to urban centres in search of unrelated but more profitable employment opportunities [5, 6].

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As an attempt to foreground the voices of the indigenous craft practitioners in India and the value of their products, in the last quarter of 2020, the Crafting Futures India Scheme Funded Project, Raising Awareness of Value (RAV): Women and Crafts in India, planned and delivered a series of workshops with local textiles artisans from Bhuj, India. The project aimed at co-producing visual content, still and moving image along with social media posting plans and in some cases brand names and logos for seven artisans from the region. The project was run online using multiple web conferencing and knowledge sharing collaboration platforms. The participating artisans were interviewed at length, to understand where they saw themselves within the larger global and local fashion ecosystem. Through the experience of the RAV project and the subsequent Craftisan Project (an online collaborative project between students and staff of Pearl Academy, India and Manchester Fashion Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK and Indian textile artisans) this chapter is an attempt at emphasising the importance of those on the fringes of the fashion system and why their unheard voices matter. It throws light on how indigenous practices that support social enterprise and ecologically sensitive production can contribute to the ever-increasing need for a more sustainable and responsible fashion industry.

1 Introduction

1.1 *Craft in India*

Considering the rise in consumer demand, Indian handicrafts have unquestionably illustrated their potential for growth [4]. Craft is a matter of appropriate expression through skills [7] and has been ubiquitous in India. In India craft is not limited to hand skills but is a powerful instrument of storytelling and cultural preservation. Additionally, handicrafts are the second largest source of employment locally, employing 23 million people [8] and are deeply connected to social transformation and empowerment. The chronicles of several indigenous crafts and practices have traversed generations in India. The climatic conditions, resources, creativity and inherent or inherited skills have helped nourish different crafts across this vast region. The practice of craft especially here can thus be appreciated, as a reflection of diverse perspectives, personal stories, self-expression and a living, evolving heritage [1].

Furthermore, the growth of craftsmanship steers the way to including more sustainable practices within the local fashion industry. This has been discussed in the article ‘Fashioning Wellbeing Through Craft: A Case Study of Aneeth Arora’s Strategies for Sustainable Fashion and Decolonizing Design’ by Arti Sandhu [9].

Craft today, is being looked at, as a force of change towards a more sustainable society [10]. It looks at positive activism underpinned by the narration of strong stories with high emotive values. Communities own traditional knowledge, as practical and spiritual dimensions of life overlap within indigenous groups. Knowledge is created through efforts by people in a community and sharing practices [11]. Craft practices are brimming with shared knowledge, storytelling and draw deeply from social identity. They make up the socio-cultural fabric of society. They represent heritage that has roots in religious and folk narratives of indigenous communities. Through its model of social enterprise, craft has been responsible for community unity, empowerment and financial self-reliance.

1.2 Craft in Relation to Fashion and Design

Indian crafts have, in the recent past, seen somewhat of a revival with numerous young brands leveraging the techniques, value chains and processes inherent to the craft. These new age fashion brands predominantly work on a lean production model with limited stocks, production on demand and smaller teams [12]. However, even with all the strides that such brands, governments and local organisations are making, craft continues to frequently be placed outside of, or on the fringes of everyday design and fashion practice. This makes it complicated for independent craft makers and designers to demand a fair price for their products or be recognised as the brands they rightfully are. The newer brands leveraging crafts are often very well versed with the use of image making and storytelling to draw the consumer into the brand's eco system, be it through compelling visual narratives or content focusing on process, people and raw material [13]. The same, however, cannot be said about most independent craft producers and artisans, who, up until the COVID-19 pandemic, relied almost solely on selling to retailers and through physical exhibitions. Online sales if any were dependent solely on online aggregators who also cut into the meagre profit margins. Through aggregators and middlemen, the artisans procure lower wages, anonymity and insubstantial returns on the investment they put into their products [14]. Globalisation and changing domestic preferences have brought the crafts to face many challenges [4]. The rise of industrialisation and the stigma of inferiority associated with the crafts sector has led to a decline in the relevance of handicrafts in India. The grim reality is that many artisans today are struggling to sustain themselves and to preserve their craft against machine made replication available in local and international markets. The need of the hour is to create employment, preserve craft and to hear their stories. Opportunities need to be created without uprooting the youth from their environments [15].

1.3 Craft: Value and Social Image

At the UNESCO general conference, approximately 120 states voted for an international convention to safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage [2]. Intangible heritage also includes craft as it is an integral part of daily practice for many communities. Beyond production and consumption, craft adds meaning to society and holds high its cultural value. Crafts deserve more recognition and the recultivation of a crafting culture. In many countries like Germany, Italy and Japan craft is no longer perceived as only tangible products acknowledging skill but is additionally recognised for the stories it is capable of unpacking. This change of narrative is essential if craft practice and products are to be drawn out of the shadows and become central to the creative economy [2]. Stronger policies and programmes are required in India to raise awareness and to strengthen the craft ecosystem [16].

India's heritage draws inspiration from the environment, respects local ecology and its traditional crafts have deep roots in techniques like up-cycling, reusing, recycling, waste minimisation and material optimisation. They involve using natural materials and processes in crafting that are low on carbon emission, making craft more favourable to preserving natural resources [17].

2 Artisans: The Unheard Voices

Given the ecological crises we are faced with presently, local and ethical products and practices are critically important to sustain. It is now more crucial than ever for the artisans, who have carried the torch for these traditions for centuries, to be able to share their stories. Furthermore, craft practitioners and producers have been pushed to the background while professionally trained designers have come to the fore due to decades of exploitation and appropriation. This gap needs to be addressed and opportunities for transparent co-creation and collaboration between the traditionally trained and the formally taught need to be encouraged if traditional artisan designers are to gain prominence and a voice.

2.1 Cultural Appropriation and Migration

Borrowing cultural elements from a civilisation and recognising it for its value and meaning is important towards preserving the story and legacy of its crafts. However, borrowing an aspect by being uninformed about its significance and value may lead to misrepresentation a complete lack of assignment of its value [18]. Post colonisation, in India there has been a dominance of western culture which has taken away from its craft heritage. Another important aspect is the social image and value projection of craft to the world through the media. Intangible aspects of crafts like its story,

heritage, emotion and value need to be communicated appropriately with the intent of preserving them [11]. It is a well-researched and documented fact that Indian handicrafts play an important role in the global market with a \$7 billion USD industry of exports [19]. Artisans must deal with many brokers and dealers which has lowered their income and can be attributed to why many artisans are migrating to cities for different forms of employment [19]. Post mass industrialisation, in the last three decades alone, Indian artisans have decreased by 30% [20].

2.2 Design Practices Within Indigenous Craft Communities, Design Schools and Fashion Brands

Local and Global fashion brands are selling tangible products enveloped in intangible values that the products hold. They are also engaging with contemporary issues that plague society. Fashion in some pockets, is focusing its energies on ethical and social practices that are relevant and important for society today. Consumers are not only looking at tangible products today but also the intangible experience the brand offers associated with its identity. Individual identities that brands are building today reflect their values. Fashion is influenced by its interaction with culture, and craft is a sizeable element of culture [21]. It has the capability to shape the socio-cultural context [4]. Design schools in India have craft cluster expeditions and intervention programmes where students study the craft for a few weeks and document or look at applying different design ideas to develop innovative or new products. Artisans are perceived as skilled craftsmen by brands, designers and design school students alike, however artisans are looking at equality and inclusivity within the design communities. In an interview with the RAV Project team, artisans alluded to the same challenge, where they are approached by design schools and fashion brands for skill-based work. However, they assert that they have much more to contribute to design than only their skills. They share their stories, their art and culture through craft, and are constantly working towards innovation and creativity through their practice [22].

3 The Craftisan Project

In October of 2020, the British Council, Crafting Futures India Funded Project, Raising Awareness of Value (RAV): Women and Crafts in India, launched its first stage of workshops with local textiles artisans from Bhuj, India. The group of artisans are highly skilled weavers, dyers and embroiders who produce textile-based garments such as stoles, scarves and saris. During the COVID-19 lockdown these artisans were able to develop their textiles but their primary reliance on face-to-face channels for sales, such as exhibitions and craft fairs, meant that opportunities to sell their goods, instantly diminished. During the primary research stage, one of the artisans, Adil

Khatri, shared his experience of interactions with established fashion designers. He disclosed that many designers saw him as a skilled artisan but not as a creative contributor and a designer or innovator within the textile space. 'I don't replicate designs,' he categorically stated and added that he had his own unique design process and was looking to refashion the term artisan to the more befitting 'artisan designer' in its stead.

In its first stage, RAV focused on the promotion of these artisans' current products via photography, digital marketing, and brand development workshops. The workshops were aimed at empowering the artisans themselves to create compelling social media content to be shared on Instagram and Facebook. The artisans were also provided with 'Home Studio Kits' comprising of a sewing machine, a back-drop stand, a dress form, a tripod and two studio lights. This was done with the aim of helping them become self-sufficient in being able to promote their own products digitally and virtually. More specifically for the female artisan designers, considering the local socio-cultural norms, the home studio kits proved to be a boon as they were traditionally, not encouraged to travel to external studios, unaccompanied.

A long-term approach and consistency are paramount to being able to leverage social media as a channel for promotion and sales. What the content should be, how often it should be posted, how one draws a consumer into the craft brand's ecosystem, are all important to know for novice brands. This establishes a strong need for sustained empowerment of social storytelling. Social storytelling takes information that may not be exciting and transforms it to make it important, impassioned and relevant. In the case of hand-crafted products, it has the power to move individuals at a personal level. It removes anonymity and focuses on stories of the people behind the products. Lived experiences are carefully crafted into compelling narratives that leverage history, timelessness and value. This also gives the craft producers control over the narrative and builds awareness, leading to the assignment of fair value to their products. The 2nd stage, The Craftisan Project (February 2021 to June 2021), which is reported here, was a live global co-creation project developed by staff from Pearl Academy (PA) in India and Manchester Fashion Institute (MFI), Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) in Manchester United Kingdom, in collaboration with their students and the Indian artisan designers. The Craftisan Project takes ahead the RAV project that focused on training artisan designers from Bhuj in image making, photography and storytelling for social media. The intention for the Craftisan Project was for students at both universities to collaborate with the artisans and produce social media campaigns and posting strategies that could provide a more structured approach for the artisans and their brands when engaging online, specifically looking at sustained social storytelling. With students and teachers from two very diverse cultures, social and economic backgrounds, these varied perspectives were fundamental to creating globally apposite outputs. To this end, the intention with the development of this project was to create a community of practice and unique methods of visual expression via storytelling. The students, with the help of the artisan designers, defined the target audience, the aspirations of the producers and how they may resonate with the group of people being communicated to.

3.1 Structure and Learning Outcomes

The study of art and design as an academic and intellectual pursuit, develops a range of cognitive abilities related to the aesthetic, ethical and social contexts of the human experience. Engagement in the study of art and design is therefore a commitment to improving the quality of one's own and others' experiences, and this statement succinctly acknowledges a responsibility towards sustainable development and towards equipping students to work in a way that contributes to society, the economy and the environment, both in the present and for the future [23].'

The primary project planning team comprising of Shalini Gupta (PA), and Dr. Elizabeth Kealy Morris (MFI), started by examining the need of the artisan designers and how they may benefit from a project with students. This led to the formulation of a very specific brief, learning outcomes and deliverables expected from the students. They investigated the outcomes produced by the artisan designers in the previous RAV project and built up taking ahead the groundwork laid there.

The students were to work alongside the artisans to support the storytelling of their brands, communicate their goals, aspirations and aims and work together to develop a rationale for the brands and products seeking answers to the following and other questions:

- What drives, motivates, and inspires the artisan?
- How can we work together with the artisans to tell the unique stories about their brands and products?

The staff, students and Indian craft producers were encouraged to work co-creatively using digital platforms and virtual learning environments. Delivery was planned through masterclasses, collaborative production meetings, demonstrations and virtual visits. The students were supplied with statements from the artisan and images of their product ranges.

The students were tasked with developing promotional campaigns for the artisans' brands which were to include:

- A strategic plan of Social Media posts on relevant platforms.
- An art-directed, styled and storyboarded pitch of fashion film/video of the artisans at work to highlight the skill of the makers and the heritage of the products produced.
- Edited test films.

3.2 Findings/Development/Analysis/Evidence

A survey was conducted among the 20 students selected for the project to establish a baseline and have a sense of what they felt they were going to gain during the project and what they wanted to gain coming out of it. When asked what they understood of these terms, the participants believed that collaboration and co-production were a

coming together of diverse perspectives towards a common goal wherein the outcome was enriched on account of the differences in perspective. The term ‘artisan’ to most meant an individual who was skilled especially in the handmade.

Sustainability means meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their personal needs. In addition to natural resources, we also need social and economic resources. Sustainability is not just environmental. Embedded in most definitions of sustainability we also find concerns for social equity and economic development [24].

The above statement published in a report by the University of Alberta, Office of Sustainability, sums up the responses by the participants who referenced it in part or whole.

The participants expected to learn more about craft, the process, the people, and what drives and motivates the artisans to continue this journey despite the hardships they have to face. They also hoped that in some small way they may be able to have a positive impact on the life of another person. Understanding sustainable practices and learning new skills were the highest motivators for the group.

To see the application of technology in pushing crafts ahead was a welcome and much needed antithesis. It was planned as a four-week project within which the first few weeks followed a mixed pedagogical approach of information transfer through masterclasses, followed by studio-based learning through group work and discussions and reflective practice through group tutorials with an assigned mentor. Collaboration and co-production with the artisans, mentors and peers were the intended learning outcomes and the backbone of the project. The projects also gave insight into the need for innovation, sensitivity, empathy, problem solving, collaboration and inclusivity within the wider fashion industry.

3.3 Input and Outcomes

The first session in week one was an introductory session where the students were briefed about the project, made familiar with the virtual platform and the resources. These included the project handbook that housed the links to all the masterclasses as well as group work and tutorial rooms. The folders where they could find weekly and general reading and viewing resources and where they could upload their weekly and final tasks.

In the same session Ms. Harroop Grang (PA), and Dr. Elizabeth Kealy Morris (MFI) were invited to talk about the current state of craft in India and the UK. They discussed the evolution, transformation and relevance of craft today. This helped the students understand the deeper meaning and significance of craft in their lives. It laid a good foundation for students who didn’t have a background in and knowledge of craft.

Session two by Mr. Paddy Lonergan (MFI) discussed various promotional theories and market segmentation. This was very helpful for students in understanding their

artisans, the artisans’ clients, and target audience as per demographic, geographic, behavioural and psychographic parameters. It helped them in formulating an in-depth analysis of the client as a base to develop the final promotion plan. They studied the artisans’ market, worked on the market segmentation, and prepared a promotion plan for social media.

In week two, an art direction and story boarding masterclass was conducted by Ms. Poppy Cartwright (MFI). Students had to plan a film for the artisans, documenting their story and the story of their craft using technology tools. This masterclass helped them understand the process of creating a story board and the importance of creating one for their film. They worked with their groups and created story boards (Fig. 1) in the given format for the film they were planning to create.

The second masterclass in this week focussed on brand styling with Ms. Sonia Genders (MFI). The class threw light on how every brand has a unique style that conveyed the brand’s identity. The masterclass also focused on identity and storytelling as important aspects of image making. Students looked at examples from varied brands to study, analyse and interpret styling within different contexts (Fig. 2).

The masterclasses in week three by Mr. Amitesh Singhal and Mr. Aditya Mittal (PA) focussed on film planning and editing techniques. Students learnt framing, colour correction and editing from a creative and storytelling perspective. They compiled short clips shot and shared by the artisans into a short film for their brand.



Fig. 1 Storyboard prepared by students to communicate the story and process of an artisan’s (Adil Khatri) craft

Brand Moodboard and Colour Palette



Fig. 2 Style Board created by students for artisans to communicate their visual language

The videos were shot by the artisans using storyboards (Fig. 3) created by the student groups.

The pitch was the culmination of this project. Every group created a pitch presentation for their artisans. Artisans shared their feedback and ideas on the pitch. The nuances of making an effective pitch presentation were taught in a masterclass by Dr. Elizabeth Kealy Morris of MFI.



Fig. 3 Screenshot from a film created by Group 1 for the artisan Krishna Vankar. The film captures the story and process behind her craft of weaving. Link to the film: TAAGA by Krishna- The Film.mp4

For the pitch, in addition to the film, the student groups created and presented a social media promotion plan (Fig. 4) for every artisan based on their primary and secondary research and artisans’ requirements. Students presented eco-friendly, cost effective, zero waste packaging ideas for products created by artisan designers and in some cases presented their clients with new brand names, logo ideas (Fig. 5) and website design ideas (Figs. 6 and 7).

Additionally, they suggested relevant hashtags, captions, posting schedules, interactive elements on Instagram like reels, stories and posts, for maximum engagement. As part of the final pitch, they emphasised on the importance of creatively expressing the process and story behind the craft as it connected the target audience to the brand, product and people. The films the student groups created for each artisan focused on this very idea of presenting process, heritage, culture and people.

A mid project survey was conducted with the student group to see how they felt about the project, collaborating with the other students and the artisans. One student said on the project experience this far ‘...people working globally on a project that has



Fig. 4 Screenshot of social media posting plan created by students to show details of artisan’s (Zakiya Khatri) craft along with establishing their identity as a designer



Fig. 5 Proposed logo Designs

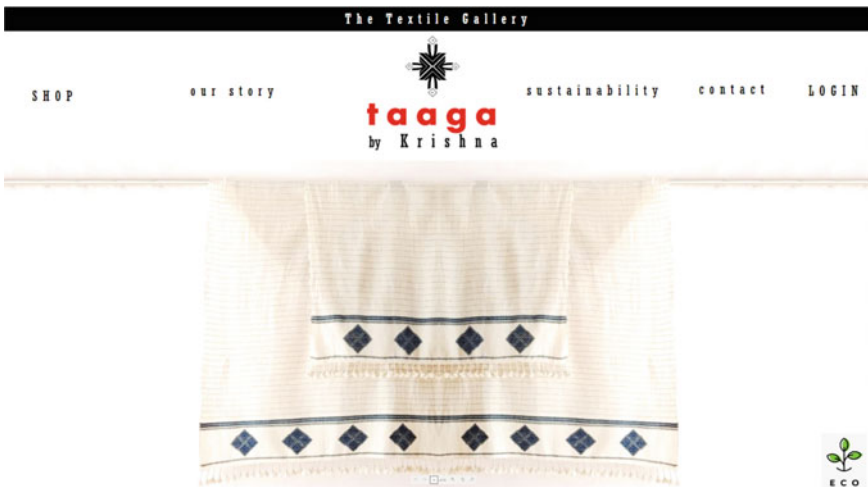


Fig. 6 Screenshot of the mock website created by Group 1 for artisan Krishna Vankar. The website covers aspects like storytelling and sustainability for the craft of weaving

a real impact over someone’s life is an amazing thing to do.’ Although the students believed that the process of co-production and collaboration had been an enriching experience, they would have liked more time with both the artisans and their group of peers.

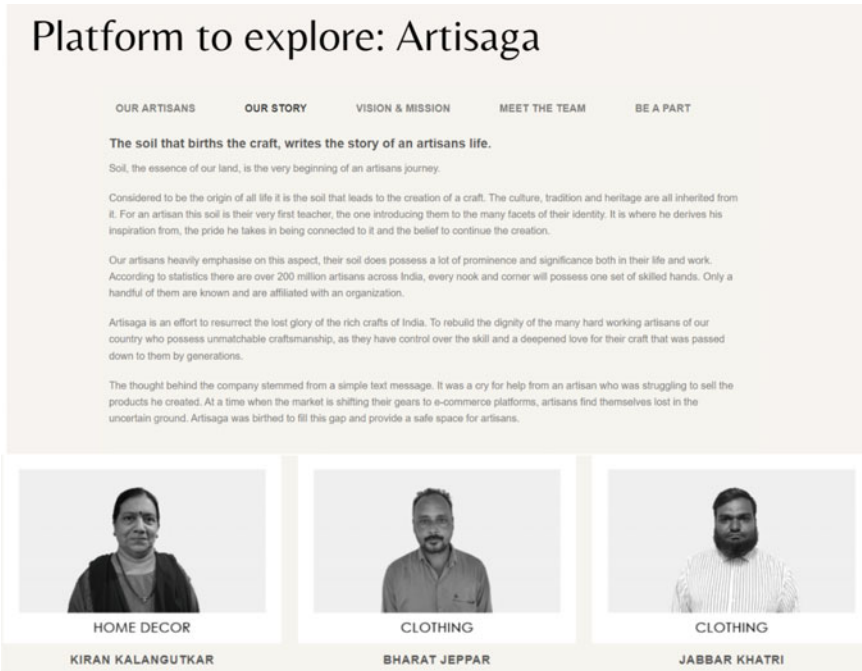


Fig. 7 A page from the mock website created by students for one of the artisans’ that highlights the story of artisans and shares their images so they can be recognised for their crafts and their stories are heard

4 Conclusion

It is important to consider artisans as equal to designers as they bring skill, creativity and innovation through craft. Reclaiming traditions and skills, and respecting people and processes, is the perfect antidote to today’s accelerated cycles, and many of us have our own familial or community heritage craft handprint to inspire us: it’s about unravelling this thread, looking back and moving forward [9]. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [25] are integrated—they recognise that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability. This collaboration between educational institutes and Indian artisans creates a community for upskilling, exchange of knowledge that helps in promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG Goal 4). It also aims at a more inclusive space where new ideas are welcomed, acknowledged and executed for the growth and development of all.

The Project team worked with five women artisans. Laxmi Pawar, a participant, based in Bhuj, learnt the craft of Suf embroidery from her mother and now has a community of women who practice the craft alongside her. The craft is women centric, and her purpose is to empower women of her community economically

as well as socially. Historically and even today, women play an important role in craft communities across India. Even though, socially, gender inequalities are deep rooted, and change is gradual, it is important to discuss and raise awareness foregrounding their contribution. Empowerment is an important objective which also looks at helping women artisans get equal economic and social opportunities within the system (SDG Goal 5).

The book *Less is more* [26] discusses the idea of an economy where people produce and sell useful goods and services, an economy where people make rational, informed decisions about what to buy; an economy where people get compensated fairly for their labour; an economy that circulates money to those who need it; an economy where innovation makes better, longer-lasting products that reduce ecological pressure. This project was aimed at being a step in this direction and to see ourselves once again as part of a broader community of living beings [26]. This project primarily attempted to equip artisans with tools to create and promote a sustained, inclusive and sustainable growth environment (SDG Goal 8). Spoken language is not universal. However, images both still and moving, are understood by all. By this measure, voices are not only heard, but can be seen and touched.

Technology is often seen as the antithesis to the hand made. However, here we used technology to create cultural impact, to promote the exchange of stories, knowledge, skills and information within the project and in support of value communication and social promotion of the artisan designer's brands online. Such projects prove that it is possible to nurture a socially driven mindset among young design graduates that could lead to increased collaboration between the formally trained and the traditionally trained. These traditionally trained artisan designers inherently practice zero waste, inclusive, collaborative and ecologically friendly methods of production and the more these two groups communicate and work together the more this could send young people into the fashion industry with the drive to fix the well documented ills that plague it.

Finally, more visibility to artisans and craft products can motivate young people to stay with the traditional art forms and preserve a heritage that is fast becoming obsolete dew to a dwindling market [27]. There is a potential market to expand to, considering the growth of global and domestic tourism and spending power. Artisan will need access to more markets, buyers and technologies [4]. The project has brought to light the need for digital and visual literacy among Indian artisans if they must keep up with a globally influenced audience. Expanding the boundaries of human community, our culture and our consciousness is important from a social perspective. This project was an attempt to change the way they see the world, and this requires listening, empathy, dialogue and collaboration. [26, 28]. Craft is a powerful voice for the artisans, it carries stories, heritage, culture and promotes co-existence with environment and community [1] and this project is a step towards communicating the unheard stories of artisans through the application of technology.

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