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Kala Raksha: From Cultural Identity to Intellectual Property

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Part of GLOBAL ENTERPRISE: CHALLENGES FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Through Kala Raksha we explore the dynamic relationship between fashion and tradition, and examine how working for the global fashion market was turned from a threat to cultural identity to an opportunity for developing a concept of intellectual property.

In traditional South Asian society, identity is visually articulated. Dress unequivocally expresses ethnic affiliation. Identity is hierarchical; a person first belongs to a region, then an ethnic community, a family, and finally is an individual.

In Kutch, embroidery has played a major role in women's lives. Many ethnic communities have embroidered for centuries. This traditional art was never assigned commercial value. However, it was recognized as a cultural asset. Traditional embroidery was created for social exchange, as contribution to dowry, gifts to children, family, the fiancé, and in-laws. Often, embroidery was received before the bride was met, so it introduced her, demonstrating her creativity, intelligence, and love. Above all, embroidery proclaimed identity.

Embroidery styles eloquently expressed the hierarchy of cultural identity. Far more than technique, traditions were design languages comprising stitches, colors, motifs, patterns, and composition. Each style articulated the culture of the wearer, and each was understood as cultural property. Yet, each piece was unique. The concept of rote repetition was completely alien. Innovation was essential to embroidery, and it breathed the essential life into a tradition. Thus embroidery style conveyed not only the historical evolution of region and community; community members could also distinguish an individual's work like handwriting.

The commercialization of craft traditions began in Kutch in the 1960s. For Kutchi embroiderers, it was a viable option. In many traditional societies, social constraints prohibit women from going out to earn through manual labor such as construction, agricultural, or drought relief work. Lack of education precluded other livelihoods. Embroidery could be integrated with essential household work. But few alternatives for earning meant little negotiating power, and embroidery usually earned less than manual labor. The social status of an artisan was commensurate.

Tradition and Fashion

Indirectly, commercial embroidery enabled the advent of local fashion. By the 1990s, NGOs, and traders were providing work to hundreds of artisans. Women had less time for their own handwork, but they now had the power to purchase the synthetics and ready made trims that were becoming available. Traditions have always evolved over time, in response to the evolution of societies. But fashion was distinctly different from traditional innovation in its rate and extent of change, duration of trend, sphere of influence, and sense of volition.

In turn, fashion began to directly impact traditional embroidery. Commercial work targeted urban and international markets. Professional designers intervened to make embroidery "less ethnic," manipulating motifs, pattern, and colors with little knowledge or interest in styles. Emulating the industrial model—faster, cheaper and more uniform—designers printed patterns and had women fill them in with embroidery. Concept was separated from execution. Traditions were diluted. Personal identity and creativity were out of the question. Artisans became workers.

Commercialization insidiously eroded the artisans' sense of aesthetics and self worth. Perfected, decorative renditions of tradition were selling as fashion. So, artisans felt these were "better." The elders reflected, "We used to not do very good embroidery..." Young women were beginning with commercial embroidery and did not enjoy a deep connection to their traditions. Embroidery became a matter of aesthetic, and cultural identity was devalued.

Thus, while Fashion, the engine driving commercial work, provided an opportunity to earn, it threatened cultural heritage.

Enter Kala Raksha

In 1993, I, an artisan Dayaben, and her brother Prakash took the challenge to try an alternative approach. We shared the vision of creating work with cultural integrity for the contemporary fashion market, and founded Kala Raksha.

Kala Raksha used local resources as a strategy for building the organization. We hired community members as staff and expanded using local networks. But our key asset and resource was cultural heritage. We understood traditions as core entities rather than means to an end. And we sought to mobilize these unique aesthetic identities. We established a museum with artisan participation, and began to develop products by engaging artisans to innovate from the museum collections.

This valuation of traditional knowledge and skills activated creativity. Nearly every development within the organization has come from artisan initiative. Hariyaben demanded fair payment, thus founding

artisan pricing committees, and she fashioned tiny elephants and camels out of workshop scraps, initiating a recycled line.

Meanwhile, money, exposure and new fashion accelerated changes in cultural identity. Women substituted traditional fabrics with synthetic replicas, and soon preferred ethnic-neutral polyester prints for skirts, blouses, and veils. Village girls no longer wanted to wear their traditional dress.

Most significant, fashion, increased possibility, and choice—coupled with the revolution of the cell phone—altered the hierarchy of identity. Now, the concept of the individual emerged.

Kala Raksha in the New Millennium

A massive earthquake in 2001 heralded the New Millennium in Kutch. Its aftermath of cultural industries jolted Kala Raksha to reflect on its goals. Competition in the production craft market had increased, and the labor wages of industries that had proliferated in the region lured artisans. Kala Raksha realized that despite so much effort, the wages and social status of artisans were still equated with labor.

Yet artisans' innovations within their own traditions demonstrated vibrancy and the ability to define and fulfill a design brief. Pabiben sampled a ribbon bag based on new Dhebaria fashion. This artisan driven design, is still one of Kala Raksha's best sellers.

We were clear that income could not justify the loss of cultural heritage; empowerment must be cultural as well as economic. We knew that we needed to think away from the industrial development model, and to take into account intellectual property—not only skills but also knowledge-- and transfer these important assets to new arenas. We returned to the challenge of maintaining cultural identity and increasing value for handwork, with the understanding that the artist is the steward of tradition.

Enter KRV

In 2005, Kala Raksha founded Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, the first design school for artisans, as a sustainable solution for the survival of craft traditions.

The school's premise is that if artisans themselves design, this will insure the thread of integrity—and raise their income and status. The venture multiplied Kala Raksha's visibility and capacity. A network of excellent contacts within and outside India grew. The Trust received financial and human resource support from all over the world.

As of 2011, ninety-nine artisans have graduated from the year-long program.

Local orientation and sustained input have insured its success. Both program and campus are designed to be comfortable for local artisans.

The curriculum guides artisans to appreciate the unique aspects of their traditions in the context of the world, and to draw inspiration from nature. Visiting faculty, professional designer educators, work with local permanent faculty and graduate mentors to utilize Kutchi language and culture.

Concepts are taught combining new media and traditional craft skills.

There are no age limitations for students. The only pre-requisites are that participants must be working traditional artisans.

Through the course, artisans have learned to articulate and to peer critique.

They have expanded their cultural knowledge about the global market by learning to segment markets and to interpret and evoke trend forecasts. Each artisan makes a final collection, which is juried by craft and design professionals and presented in a fashion show with a public attendance in thousands. The fashion show has highly motivated artisans, and has been an important instrument in educating the public to think about craft and artisans in other ways. In 2010, Kala Raksha launched the concept Artisan Design, a trademark to certify that a product is an artisan's own creative innovation.

The Impact of Kala Raksha

Working with Kala Raksha has changed artisans' attitudes. First, artisans gained pride in being an artisan, simply through earning. Pride in tradition and cultural identity followed. Hariyaben, a community leader, began to wear the *kanchali kurti* that the community had shunned in the 1980s. She pulled out traditional bangles and with her conscious attitude made them new fashion.

Artisans who graduated from Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya expanded their capacity to create, their prerogative to collaborate, and their ability to connect to clients.

Harkhuben- "After I completed the course and participated in two Kala Raksha design workshops, I realized what I had learned. It was easy and fun to develop new designs.

I now have confidence to interact with clients. If we want our art to flourish, this is the way we must go!"

The Vidhyalaya's year of design exploration focuses uniting concept and execution. Education also encourages all involved to view the student as a unique individual.

KRV students begin to develop their unique expressions within traditions.

In an effort to insure value for this education, Kala Raksha has employed graduates to design a new line of Art to Wear garments. So we find we have come full circle, to the original concept of each piece as a unique work of art!

The cultural evolution of a stronger individual identity created a space for the concept of intellectual property. The concept Artisan Design eventually accesses intellectual property to raise income and respect above the level of manual labor.

Current Issues and a Look to the Future

Value for creative work is the central issue. Artisan demands are still modest. Hariyaben asked RS 500 a day (a little over \$10) to teach a workshop. Designers who work with artisans take RS 75,000 per month (approximately \$1530). The difference is less the quality of work than the designer's ability to reach appropriate markets.

Both cultural heritage and intellectual property require marketing to create awareness and value. Kala Raksha's challenges now are to reach markets that appreciate and value products with cultural integrity, and to equip artisans to effectively tap cultural heritage for contemporary markets.

As fashion draws worlds closer, this becomes very possible. When a Pabi bag sells briskly in New York and a village artisan purchases a top from Fabindia, Kala Raksha artisans can think of wearing the garments they make-- as they always did.