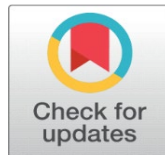
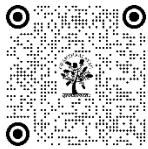


CRAFTING NEW MEANING: INNOVATION AND EXPLORATION OF MATERIALS AMONG GUJARAT'S APPLIQUÉ CRAFT CLUSTERS

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ABSTRACT

In Indian context, textile material and techniques of clothing has evolved throughout ages, contributing to the reflection of human identity and cultural values. Concurrently, owing to the dynamic nature of the materials and changing market demand, some of the traditional craftsmanship have significantly redefined textile material's interconnectedness with human society. In due process, the craftsmen have incorporated innovative design strategies to survive within a competitive market, where material and humans have engaged in non-verbal communication to generate meaningful representations of both within the given socioeconomic structure. The craft cluster of Chauhan family in Gujarat is one such instance, who have introduced significant transformation to the traditional practice of appliqué to sustain and evolve within the changing market demand. This study explores contemporary challenges faced by this industry, along with the artisans involved, to evaluate the design solutions, strategic survival mechanism, and product evolution of the same, while preserving traditional ethos.

Keywords: Appliqué Craft, Indian Craft Cluster, Sustainability, Textile Material, Traditional Artisanship, Design Innovation

1. INTRODUCTION

In terms of textile – whether it's design or variety of materials, India is a gold mine. Owing to its wide range of weather conditions across a vast geography and varied topography, the country exhibits huge range of clothing and apparels. Various communities and individuals - either through lineage or for their personal interest in this domain - have been engaged in the making, production, dyeing and design of clothes and garments for ages, across the country. Artisan cluster is one such community that is defined as geographically concentrated household units producing handicraft products. Often, such producers belong to a traditional community, who are engaged in making certain long-established products for generations.¹ In India, craft clusters comprise a rich and diverse range of traditional artisanal practices spread across the country. Many a times, they serve as an integral part of cultural and economic landscape.

¹http://craftclustersofindia.in/site/index.aspx?mu_id=3&Clid=542#:~:text=An%20artisan%20cluster%20is%20defined,long%2Destablishe d%20products%20for%20generations.

Often being region-specific, these clusters produce unique handicrafts reflecting the cultural heritage, materials, and skills of the local communities. It is a labour-intensive sector, which provides employment to millions, and has significant socio-economic and cultural importance in India.

Among many of such craft clusters, the Chauhan family of Gujarat is noteworthy. Relocated in Meghpar in Jamnagar, following their migration from Sindh (Pakistan) in 1946, the family's involvement in *appliqué*, a craft they had practiced for generations, grew from a means of survival into a thriving business employing over 1,500 artisans. However, most of these employees are women. Their products made by this community include, intricate floral, animal, and geometric patterns, that have gained international recognition in countries like the U.K., Germany, and Austria, and earned huge popularity in the domestic markets across India as well. Though, interestingly, owing to the changing market demands, the cluster have faced survival challenges during the last decade. This paper records the revival of this craftsmanship in recent years that have incorporated novel design innovation and exploration of materials to generate new meaning and context. The paper critically evaluates the changing market demand and design innovation of this craft cluster that can be introduced to other design clusters and a sustainable approach *en masse*. Therefore, the objectives of this study are,

- 1) To explore and evaluate the market strategies used by the Chauhan family.
- 2) To analyse the current challenges in sustaining traditional craft practices.
- 3) To propose innovative design and marketing strategies for altogether expansion of Indian craft clusters.

However, it is necessary to draw some attention towards the relationship between materials and humans in general.

2. INTERCONNECTEDNESS: THE MATERIAL-HUMAN RELATION

Humans have been interacting with the material world long before the emergence of Homo sapiens through evolution. Therefore, development of many philosophical pursuits, throughout the human history, is no surprise at all. The very understanding of the surrounding world, their physical laws, conceiving and constructing abstract theories, on many instances owe their inspiration to the material world and its interaction with the human being. Artistic pursuit and craftsmanship are not inseparable from these endeavours. Matters, extracted from the material world, have formed the basis of artworks and usable products since ages. They became the embodiment and means of abstract concepts, that are expressed through the nurturing of their physical properties (Smith, 1981). The evolution of different materials is interlaced with the creative and technological development of societies associated to them. With the development of technology, the relation between human and materials gets redefined that eventually shapes the social identity (Strathern, 2020). For instance, the material values within the societies of stone age (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic) and metal ages (Chalcolithic, Bronze and Iron age) are very much different from each other.

In one of his critical work, *Art as Experience* (1980), American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer John Dewey writes, "Every work of art has a particular medium by which, among other things, the qualitative pervasive whole is carried. In every experience we touch the world through some particular tentacle; we carry on our intercourse with it, it comes home to us, through a specialized organ." (p. 195) Queries on intercourse between material and humans have long been haunted scholars. While some scholars identify materials as passive entities and inert substrate of matter – distinguish from human being – where forms are imposed to create tangible objects, scholars like Tim Ingold perceives them as dynamic entity and an integral part to the processes of creativity that allows the exploration of their inherent properties (Ingold, 2007). The 'meshwork' and 'correspondence' between materials and humans have defined the creation of objects and forms as a process of drawing out potentials inherent in materials (Ingold, 2011). These interactions have been further expounded Ian Hodder, who have perceived materials as the means of meaningful representations and integral part of social strategies and practices. Materials have the potentiality to influence human behaviour and social relations (Gell, 1998). In recent years Bruno Latour have distinguished materials as the nonhuman actors of social dynamics, which is but the manifestation of relation and negotiation between human and nonhuman entity. All these endeavours denote that material and humankind share an intricate bonding bring out numerous potentials from with each other, which eventually contribute to the structure of society.

Textile, as a material, is no different from this. Humankind is clothing themselves from the Palaeolithic age, as per the evidence found, though the presence of textile predates 27000 years ago. Ever since its presence in the human culture, textile materials have shared intense bonding with humans. Apart from its utilitarian purposes, textile materials have contributed to the expression of individual and their social role by serving, so to speak metaphorically, as extensions the body. Over the centuries, garments have served immensely in reflecting human identity, encoding cultural values,

and the surrounding environment (Barthes, 1990). In the Indian context, textile and garments bear philosophical and spiritual significance. Contemporary Indian philosopher Arindam Chakravarty explains clothes as a unique entity that covers human body and consciousness; while Sant Kabir, a weaver by profession and the well-known mystic poet and philosopher of sixteenth century, utters in his *doha* (self-contained rhyming couplet composed in *Mātrika* metre),

Jhini jhini bini chadariya
Kahe ka tana kahe ka bharni
Kaun taar se bini chadariya

(The clothes are finely woven
 What is wrap, what is the weft
 With what thread this cloth is woven?)

Therefore, the role of textile materials, and techniques and craftsman communities connected to the same demand critical analysis and careful appreciation. The case of Gujarat's *appliqué* craft cluster, prime concern of this study, is one such instance.

The craft of *appliqué* can be traced back to the ancient time. Cultures around the world have explored the technique that include Egypt, West Africa, Siberia, Scandinavia, Russia, Eastern Europe, Morocco, China, and obviously the Indian subcontinent. It's an ancient technique of needlework, mostly popular among the nomadic tribes around the world, where pieces or patches of clothes are sewn together onto a larger piece, primarily to form a pattern for decoration purpose. It is assumed that due to travelling from one place to another, conditioned to weather changes, nomadic people did not have much option to afford clothes and apparels more than needed. Therefore, a sustainable approach developed among them to reuse the torn or damaged clothes to protect themselves from extreme heat or cold, which can be addressed as one of the earlier forms of product optimization. However, such a generic practice soon became part of the respective cultures, owing to the changing socioeconomic structures of the same, and emerged as a distinct ecology and aesthetic practice.

In India, the usage of *appliqué* materials is evident from the Indus Valley Civilization, though it was taken up as an art form since the Mughal era incorporating vivid, vibrant patterns and expensive textile materials. However, Kathis, Mahajans, Nomad camel herders, and folk women of native communities in northern regions of Gujarat are using the technique of *appliqué* in their textile design from an earlier time – especially while producing large canopies, tents for ox carts, and hangings of different kinds. The ancestors of the Chauhan family were nomads from the northern region of Gujarat that was part of the united India. The *appliqué* tradition was used by them to create *Gudhdi* (quilts) and *Toranas*. While the quilts have their utilitarian purpose among a wide range of consumers since earlier time, the *toranas* were made for a restricted community. Pieces of clothes are sewn together onto a larger piece of cloth to create an image of a doorway (*Torana*), which was then used as a backdrop of deities during their worship. The tradition continued even after their migration from Sindh (now Pakistan) in 1946, when the Chauhan family relocated them in Meghpar in Jamnagar. However, with the changing market demand, they had to bring in notable changes in their traditional crafts for the means of survival.



Image 1. Women artisans working in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster

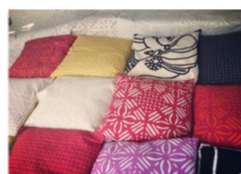


Image 2. Products in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster



Image 3. Appliqué product in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster



Image 4. Artisan working in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster

3. PREEXISTING CONCERNS

According to previous research, customers have been more attracted to mass-produced goods since the introduction of free-market economies due to the convenience, low prices, and consistency they provide (Karacan & Yardimci, 2023). The appliqué craft cluster in Gujarat was therefore confronted with price competition and the capacity of manufacturers to produce in bulk (Narasinga, 2020). Additionally, the increased availability of factory-made textiles brought about by the rise of online shopping platforms—a result of the free-market economy—posed a new danger to the community of craftspeople. Soysa (2022) notes that this trend has led to a wider range of consumers who value affordability and convenience more than the cultural and artisanal significance of handcrafted materials.

Traditional textile materials were also much less popular and used as an outcome of the social and cultural decline in respect for old practices and ceremonies. It was in the context of agricultural economies, where people worked together and shared duties, that the joint family system—the backbone of traditional Indian social organization—emerged (Uberoi, 2006). Within this structure, extended families would often live in close quarters, sharing a home and its resources while strengthening their bonds of blood. The rise of the nuclear family, however, coincided with the trend towards a market-driven economy and the values it promoted, particularly in metropolitan areas where job mobility, personal autonomy, and financial independence are paramount (D'Cruz & Bharat, 2001). In contrast to the traditional collectivist and interdependent family values of earlier times, the free-market economy promoted values of consumerism, personal success, and competition. This, in turn, led to a generational shift in lifestyle choices, with younger members moving away from ancestral homes and traditional occupations (Srinivas, 2003). As a result of modernization and economic change, old social roles that supported cultural values and shared responsibilities are crumbling. This has led to a weakening of the previous family structure.



Clockwise from left:

Image 5. Traditional Torana in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster

Image 6. Traditional Gudhdi in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster

Image 7. Traditional Gudhdi in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster

The appliqué craft cluster has been hit hard by current socio-cultural and economic shifts, which have forced artists to develop and adjust their products to suit modern customers' tastes. By doing so, they have managed to keep their

items culturally genuine while still using contemporary design aspects and marketing methods (Stanes & Gibson, 2017). According to recent research on the appliqué craft cluster in Gujarat, namely in Ahmedabad, the artisans there have a diverse approach, which helps traditional crafts stay alive by drawing in new customers (Biswas & Kalaiya, 2023). However, research has shown that social entrepreneurship projects, which often include the joint efforts of many stakeholders including government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), may have a positive impact on community-based crafts like these (Pathak & Mukherjee, 2020). This whole shift toward community-based craft is exemplified by the Chauhan family's appliqué craft cluster.



Clockwise from top left:

Image 8. Soft toys with contemporary motifs in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster

Image 9. Soft toy in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster

Image 10. Ladies' purse, laptop covers, and pencil holders in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster

Image 11. Soft toys with contemporary motifs and typography in Chauhan's Appliqué Craft Cluster

4. CRAFT CLUSTER OF CHAUHAN FAMILY: TOWARDS A NEW FUTURE

The Chauhan family's appliqué cluster has expanded from a little tailoring establishment to a substantial enterprise, employing more than 1,000 women craftsmen. Currently, their product line includes *gudhdis*, *toranas*, door hangings, and clothes; however, it was once restricted to only *gudhdis* and *toranas*. Confronted with constraints in product diversification and attractiveness to younger demographics, the cluster recognized that their conventional *appliqué* products failed to meet contemporary lifestyle demands and depended significantly on a niche market of heritage craft consumers. Consequently, they implemented specific design strategies to remain viable in this competitive landscape.

Initially, they presented a variety of items with current themes, as opposed to the previously restricted options. The introduction of items like laptop covers, tote bags, soft toys, purses, handbags, and mobile phone cases, featuring modern patterns with classic designs, swiftly captivated a younger clientele. Historically, the patterns and designs used in appliqué often derived inspiration from local folklore and environment, functioning as a visual story of the community's legacy (Singh, 2005). Recently, artisans have included themes and designs influenced by modern environments. The themes and designs are varied, including emojis, cartoons, caricatures, mascots, logos, digital icons, and English typography, with a bright, lively, and sometimes fluorescent color palette. Consequently, this innovative product line captivated the youth, mostly teens and college students.

Secondly, the artisans have used a novel approach in choosing new materials, such as mesh or lighter textiles, as opposed to conventional cottons. This assortment of materials broadened their color palette and integrated several textures juxtaposed inside a single product. This has facilitated the diversification of their product offerings and the expansion into larger markets. Nevertheless, during this procedure, they consistently preserved their originality in both

stitching and visual appeal. Consequently, in the lack of official promotion, the family has effectively sold their goods to international markets, propelled by their commitment to client pleasure and quality.

Moreover, a small market persisted for handmade textiles, especially among buyers who prioritize sustainability, ethical manufacturing, and cultural heritage. The growing awareness of environmental concerns and the detrimental effects of fast fashion has prompted some customers to choose handcrafted alternatives that reflect their ideals (Cai & Choi, 2020). The Chauhan family's appliqué cluster has capitalized on this trend by highlighting the distinctive attributes of their goods, like the use of natural dyes and traditional methods, which appeal to ecologically concerned customers (Sfameni et al., 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

The *appliqué* craft cluster in Gujarat serves as a prime example of how traditional crafts can adapt to modern business practices while preserving cultural heritage. Furthermore, by redefining the age-old practice of a traditional craft, the Chauhan family have emphasized on the shifting relationship between material and human beings. Until the fabrics with *appliqué* work was used as the backdrop of deities and as quilts, they shared a special dignified place among their consumers. However, traditional crafts often end up being liabilities to new generations, who share little emotional connection with the same. This is one of the main reasons for the oblivion of many age-old crafts from the larger population, leaving a niche audience as the sole appreciator. Chauhan family, against this backdrop, has taken up a unique initiative by serving the new breed of consumers. The cultural and emotional value attached to the *appliqué* fabrics may have faded to some extent, however a new cultural value is added at the same time. This instance once again reverberates the relationship between material, technology and human society. Therefore, in an era, when many of the craft practices are losing their relevance among the larger population, the initiative taken up by the Chauhan family is noteworthy and can be cited as an example of strategic survival – as well as revival at the same time. However, the cluster needs to innovate its product offerings and marketing strategies to continue thriving in an increasingly competitive market. With the right balance of tradition and modernity, this cluster has the potential to further expand its market reach, providing sustainable livelihoods to artisans for years to come.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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