

Kala Raksha Vidyalaya: Education which preserves old traditions by creating new things

Parathi Sarathi Roy

Kutch is an arid district in western Gujarat bordered by Pakistan, the Arabian Sea and the Rann of Kutch. Although backward in some ways due to its isolation, the region is inhabited by large number of small ethnic communities and is globally acclaimed for its rich cultural heritage. The Suf embroiders are one such ethnic community where Judy Frater, a researcher from the USA, has been working since 1993 when she co-founded the Kala Raksha Trust in Bhuj, the main city in Kutch, to nurture the embroidery traditions of the region.

As a student of Indian handicraft, the vibrant colours, bold outlines and shimmering mirrors of Kutch handicraft attracted Frater. During a visit some local artisans asked her why she was only observing them and not helping. *“Madam ye aapki padhai se hamari kala ki raksha kaise hogi. Aap toh wapas chali jaogi, kala dhire dhire khatam ho jaegi;”* “Madam, how will your visit help us to preserve our art? As soon as you leave us, our art will die too.”

This comment sparked off an extensive campaign to turn the impoverished area’s native craft into a viable business. Thus began the journey of Kala Raksha from a modest group of 25 Suf embroiderers from Sumrasar Sheikh village to an organization which now markets the work of around one thousand embroiderers from 25 villages, as well as sourcing work from other artisans such as weavers, tie-and-dyers, block printers and tailors.

Literally meaning ‘preservation of art’, Kala Raksha has been instrumental in marketing Kutch embroidery to the world and providing these disadvantaged people with an alternative livelihood. The initial success of the Kala Raksha experiment can be gauged from sales which grew from Rs 27,000 in 1993-94 to Rs121,93,000 or almost \$200,000 in 2007-08 including a single order for more than \$ 100,000.

But the initial enthusiasm waned and sales started to go down. The management at Kala Raksha realised that the business of traditional craft had undergone tremendous changes in globalised markets. With the shift from local to distant markets, market driven professional design has become essential, and separate from the production of art. Traditional artisans rarely gain access to contemporary formal training in design, due to social and financial barriers, and are often

reduced to being mere labourers, in income and social status. Also artisans' social mobility is limited by their low education and the perceived irrelevance of available education perpetuates the status quo. There was a need for a two-pronged strategy to foster genuine sustainability and to ensure that artisans as well as their art can adapt. Firstly, traditional arts have to be revitalised as a viable livelihood option and secondly, the traditional art has to be adapted to the taste of sophisticated new markets. To facilitate this relationship to new markets, and to maximize long-term earnings through craft, artisans must learn to innovate, diversify and improve their work for the new markets. Relevant education has to address and combine an understanding of traditional crafts, contemporary design, and marketing.

To address these issues and the needs of artisans, Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya (KRV) was started by Kala Raksha in November 2005. Student-artisans develop collections of different products based on natural themes during their year-long design course. Judy Frater believes that the community themselves are best equipped to revitalise their native art form and make them economically viable. The organization intends to find a market niche for these 'artisan designed' products as a special line alongside Kala Raksha's regular products.

Kala Raksha Vidyalaya (KRV) is Kala Raksha's design school, aimed at helping the approximately 50000 Kutch artisans to create market-oriented products. The school facilitates innovation in crafts such as textiles, woodworking, and painting for male and female students, emphasising contemporary innovation within traditional design.

Artisans are rarely able to leave their homes and work for long periods because they have to earn an income. Hence the KRV curriculum is designed as a residential programme of a series of workshops which are conducted in short periods of two weeks spread over a year.

To ensure that artisans are compensated for any loss of wages while attending the course, they were originally paid a stipend of Rs1,500 per session. The aim was to eliminate the risk. After the first course, the male participants were convinced and in the second year, they attended on a no-stipend basis. In the third year, they were asked to pay a fee of Rs.10,000, about \$140, which KRV's advisors believed was reasonable.

For women, craft is still largely for wages rather than independent business and it was decided that for the first five years female students would be supported with a stipend of Rs750 per session.

The school occupies an eight-acre campus about 85 kilometres from Kala Raksha in the Mundra Taluka, a peaceful rural setting near the Gulf of Kutch, run by a permanent staff of nine. The school is unique in its environment, curriculum content and pedagogy. The curriculum was designed to enhance the skills of adult artisans who already have some exposure to a body of traditional knowledge, focused on preparing them for the marketplace. The focus is on disseminating knowledge and skills that can be directly applied to the artisan's own art, to enable innovation suitable for contemporary markets, and to identify effective ways of meeting emerging commercial preferences.

The course consists of six modules; Colour: Sourcing from Heritage and Nature; Basic Design; Market Orientation; Concept, Communication and Projects; Finishing and Collection Development; Merchandising and Presentation. Each student works to create a collection that is displayed and evaluated by a panel of experts, ultimately for sale to the public. Students have hands-on experience making products, and they have research trips and other opportunities to inspire their creations. For example, one student created a Dariya Collection inspired by her visit to Mandavi Beach near Kutch. Students visit shops such as Fab India, Anokhi and Bandhej in nearby Ahmedabad to get an exposure to modern retailing and the ways they can make their traditional textile arts more appealing to urban customers. The school also has a computer centre equipped with digital cameras, scanners and printers, for students to learn how to use computers as a tool for creating and documenting their design work throughout the course.

KRV aims to revitalise the ethnic art forms of marginalised groups such as untouchables, and pastoral nomads, the Jats, Rabaris, Meghwals, the Mutua, and different Muslim groups. Each community has its own distinctive style of embroidery. KRV also works with male weavers and printers, and aims to harness long-standing community skills and not to impose any sense of hierarchy in aesthetics. The student artisans are encouraged to look at every line or stitch differently, and are motivated to defend or critique their own work for better designs and creations. The wide variation in student ages enables every participant to appreciate that in learning there is no age-limit. Learning is mutual when elders' experience enables younger ones

to grasp new concepts and the enthusiasm of the younger students inspires the older ones to look for new designs.

KRV is a good example of a thriving Public-Private-Community Partnership (PPCP), started with generous funds from the Development Commissioner for Handicrafts, the Government of India and private funding agencies such as All Together Now International, ArtAction, Bestseller Fund, the COMO Foundation, Eileen Fisher Project Marigold, UNESCO and many private donors. The cost of the training is Rs110,000 or about US\$1,800 per student and until recently all the artisan-students were sponsored from these grants.

Artisan involvement is fundamental to the education at KRV. At the heart of opening the world's first design school for traditional artisans was the belief that if Indian handicrafts are to flourish commercially the creativity of our traditional artisans and more importantly their art KR believe in serving Art not Craft. Craft connotes charming creations made by anonymous workers while Art and artists command respect.

The talent of Kutchi artisans was always globally acclaimed and has been passed down over many generations. Before Kala Raksha however, its commercial potential was unappreciated by the local community. Kala Raksha showed them that there was indeed a market for their ethnic creations and it was possible to make a living as an artisan. Judy Frater realised that the existing talent needed improvement to build on the people's existing capabilities and show them how to use their income productively. Management was always conscious of this need; they built a community centre and formed the KRVADA (Kala Raksha Vidyalaya Artisan Design Association)

It was soon realised that what began as a 'project' to improve incomes also had to address the artisans' health and education. The KRV was extended to include health care and basic education, covering nutrition, hygiene, economics and management. In order to bridge the digital divide, new technology is an important component. Computer aided design is used to extend existing knowledge, and the medium is quickly accepted, encouraging artisans to think in innovative ways to access new markets. KRV established links with premier Indian design institutions to provide technical inputs to its artisans. Judy Frater mobilised a faculty team from these institutions to develop a dynamic curriculum for KRV.

Art preservation has become an integral part of the newly revitalised Kutch economy and has spread into many other activities. Of all the solutions that Kala Raksha created, the design school has had the most impact. Artisans have slowly started to realise the difference between skilled and unskilled labour and the importance of designs as a way to define their culture. In 2003, after establishing Kala Raksha Judy Frater received an Ashoka Foundation Fellowship to establish KRV with the aim of reaching 50,000 Kutchi artisans

When she first visited Kutch, decades of subsidy to artisans had weakened the concept of native craft as an art. She was convinced that female embroiders could learn to generate income without giving up the cultural identity that is a sacred part of art. KRV aims to inspire artisans to preserve their tradition through craft and improve their quality of life through the development of business and time management skills, basic health care and nutrition. The curriculum was developed to provide appropriate education to the artisans that revitalised the Kutch tradition while meeting the needs of the market. With technical inputs from professionals such as Maria Conneli of New York's Fashion Institute of Technology and Jan Baker of the Rhode Island School of Design, an innovative curriculum was developed that enhances existing skills using the latest technology.

Given its setting, KRV understood that women would face resistance if they participated in KRV's courses, so they organised separate classes for women. The educational background, experience and working methods are very different for men and women so the curriculum needed to be tailored differently.

The graduation at KRV is a grand affair, providing an opportunity for local feedback and public awareness. Spread over three days, the campus is visited by over 6,000 people. The ceremony provides graduating students with a platform to test their designs with craft buyers and professionals. Each student works towards creating a final collection that is judged by a panel of eminent experts, which helps the graduating artisans to become self-employed designers. It is also a window for outsiders to witness the creativity and capability of these talented artisans and to develop a taste for traditional art. The fashion show has become a popular event, helping to place craft in a new contemporary light and attracting tourists from around the world.

Formed primarily as an educational institution, KRV does not generate any income and running the institute is a major financial challenge. Efforts have been concentrated on building the institution, ensuring an effective curriculum and genuine support from artisan communities. It will be necessary to find more ways to raise money in the future. In KR's exhibitions, the designs of KRV students are displayed as a separate product line and all the income goes directly to the student. Every product is unique and has its own story.

Kala Raksha participates in a number of exhibitions and this contributes about a third of their turnover. Delhi is the most lucrative market followed by Mumbai. They also sell in other cities in India, including one outlet of their own, and they participate in international sales events in London, the Textile Centre of Minneapolis, USA, Denmark and other countries.

In 1993, its first year of operation, Kala Rakshya sold Rs 27000 worth of products, and by 2008 sales had reached twelve million rupees or about \$170,000. Sales of student's own products for their own account amounted to Rs 400,000 or over \$6000. Between 20 and 25 students graduate every year, and eight of the male graduates have already started their own businesses, selling to major national and international retailers such as FabIndia.

Kala Raksha Vidyalaya was started to enhance the link between design, production and the market. KRV and its parent organisation Kala Raksha have achieved good things but there is more to do. . Like every NGO involved in marketing of traditional crafts, KRV is facing problems. In the business of selling crafts, creating value, quality consistency and supply chain management are key issues which must be part of the school's curriculum. KRV also faces the threat of relocation as two power plants are to be built in its close vicinity. This may play havoc with the already fragile ecological balance of Kutch, not to mention the loss to artisans if KRV is forced to move or close.

This neoliberal for-profit intervention may even destroy what seems to be a unique community driven, privately initiated and publicly supported bottom-up model of development. So much has been achieved by Judy Frater. She is not from India; the future of KRV poses a challenge to India's own development professionals .
