



CLIMATE ACTION / OPINION

Saving India's Artisans Digitally

By Osama Manzar



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9 Min Read

Digital empowerment through policy and infrastructural change is the only way to remove yet another layer of middlemen in the lives of India's craftspeople

Sometime in June 2020, I got a call from Kalle Bhai – his real name is Muzaffar Ansari, a man well-known in Chanderi village who is a weaver, calligrapher, barefoot historian, and an amazing social worker. Kalle bhai has been associated with me for more than a decade. He sought help for more than 5000 weavers from Chanderi who had no jobs and all their job orders had been left un-picked by the traders. However, he also shared some good news, saying that close to a hundred households in Chanderi

were using social media and digital means to sell their products directly to consumers in India and abroad. And that each of these households had a youth who had trained at Chanderiyaan, the Digital Design Resource Center set up a decade back by Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) in partnership with the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology.

I have personally collected videos narratives of all these youths about how they fought COVID-19 and the pandemic lockdown and used digital tools to continue their traditional business of weaving.



A Chanderi weaver at Chanderiyaan center of DEF.

Historically, India has had a vibrant crafts tradition and preserved skills of handicraft and weaving. Not only is the textile and handloom sector the second largest employer in India, but according to the Fourth All India Handloom Census 2019-20, 31 lakh (3.1 million) people across the country work in the handloom and weaving sector with 88% in rural areas. They take forward the generational tradition of weaving intricate

patterns and producing unique work through their craftsmanship, which also becomes a means to preserve their heritage.

But, the traditional supply chain, which starts with weavers and artisans and ends with customers is heavily dominated by various layers of middlemen. Middlemen hire weavers on the basis of handloom demand. Raw materials such as cotton, silk, *zari*, etc., are provided by the middlemen, and the cost of labour is determined by the amount of handwork on a piece of fabric. This system however has not benefited the artisans at the bottom layer of the supply chain.



A collective of women mat weavers in Pattimadai in a digital training session.

Artisans Have Lost Agency to Middlemen

Currently two major industry issues impact the socio-economic and market status of weavers and artisans. The first is that artisans, who used to be the producers traditionally as well as designers, knowledge

bearers, suppliers and masters of their own business, are no longer such. Rather, they are seen as mere labourers.

Secondly a whole layer of middlemen fills the supply chain occupying all positions that once belonged to the artisans. New tools of communication like digital interventions has also ushered in a new kind of middleman. This is not to deny the importance of middlemen themselves, but the fact is that the main producers have taken a backseat.

Thus, there is a need to get in touch directly with the artisans to enable them to get back to their original status of being producers, designers, suppliers and negotiators. This can only be possible once the knowledge gap that lies bare between the layers of the supply chain is filled. Rural artisans have limited ideas about fashion trends, market needs, prices or even market capability. They live in a dark age when it comes to information. They may be connected to their work but are not fully connected with the market realities. That's why they are exploited by middlemen in the first place.

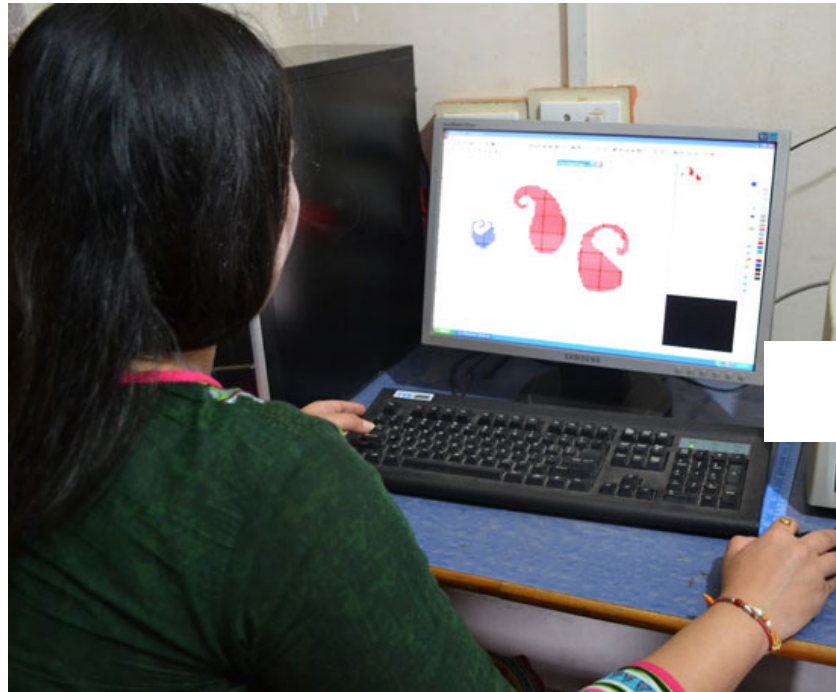


A woman weaver trying embroidery on a Chanderi sari in Chanderiyaan.

Digital is the Way Forward

The only way to turn artisans into independent decision makers is to digitally literate them. They must be exposed to online channels of information — get access to online facilities, fashion design, repositories and even modern digital tools for designing like CAD-CAM (software for computer-aided design and manufacturing). The success of such ventures lies in creating an ecosystem by digitally enabling every person in artisan households, clusters and in villages.

I think markets can be developed at the bottom of the pyramid if market separations between producers and consumers are reduced through spatial, temporal, informational and financial separations. This has been successfully executed by DEF under Chanderiyaan. The project ended up creating a digital repository of more than 20,000 designs which became a reference point of all the local weavers who helped create the design repositories.



Digitisation design of a pattern for a chanderi sari, Chanderi Digital Design

Let me share a recent example from late 2020, when we were still struggling with the first wave of COVID-19 that had closed down the entire artisanal-based industry and markets. During the digital training programme which comprised functional and financial skilling and literacy of Pattamadai mat weavers, mostly women, with the Tamil Nadu government and the Crafts Council of India (CCI), I observed that even though all trainees had their smartphones with them, there was a wide gap in knowledge about market and fashion trends. Not only were the products inadequately matched with the market but the weavers only had limited knowledge of about five to ten kinds of products. However, complete digital training can turn them into a new breed of producers who are directly connected to the market, commerce and fashion trends. It will minimise their dependency on government and community.

The Changed Landscape - COVID-19 and what went amiss

After the lockdowns exacerbated the deteriorating situation of weavers, collapsing supply-chains and shutting down of looms, digital

infrastructures could have been instrumentalised to provide an alternative. Digital infrastructure is not limited to information but it is now an infrastructure that links communication, supply chain, retail and producers. It has the potential to revamp traditional thinking and improve livelihood opportunities of weavers and artisans by stripping the over-dependency on the middlemen. Lack of digital training, especially among weavers, as noted in our investigation turned out to be among the biggest obstacles. Handloom sector needs a robust policy mechanism, and mass digital literacy programme. Otherwise, centuries old craftsmanship preserved through generations could become a part of our memories.

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Banner: Digitisation of a Chanderi sari picked up from historical practice at Chanderiyaan.

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