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A brand new yarn

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In Kutch, women and young men are returning to handloom weaving in a remarkable counter wave

“My loom is my computer,” says Prakash Naranbhai Vankar when I ask him whether he would have preferred working at an IT firm. The young weaver, who is sitting at his loom in Bhujodi village in Kutch, tells me that weaving carpets is anything but mechanical: there is thought, innovation, and love that goes into it. And freedom, and identity, and being with family.

Against the tide of handloom decline across India, there is a quiet revival of handloom weaving, *vannat*, in Kutch among the women, the youth and the elders of the Marwada vankar community. And I am here to find out why.

Prakash is one of several young people who have either stayed with weaving, or, more remarkably, come back to it after trying their hand at construction and other jobs. Prakash learnt the tradition of weaving carpets from his father, but he uses new yarns and designs while staying faithful to the unique ‘Kutchi *chhaap*’ motifs.

In Siracha village, several youth have returned to their looms after leaving or being laid off from the nearby Tata and Adani factories; many more tell me they want to return. In Kotay village, Shamjibhai says: “I market my products online;

I hardly have to leave the village, I can work from the comfort of my home.” In other villages in the district, I hear similar stories of renewed interest in weaving and about its allure in terms of economics, culture, identity, dignity, convenience, social ties, and innovation.

“Such stories are rare in the handloom world, a refreshing counter to the otherwise depressing exodus of youth from such occupations,” says textile technologist Durga Venkataswamy.

New markets, new schools

Crucial to this story are institutions such as Khamir, which encourage innovation and help create new markets. Khamir is working with kala cotton, an indigenous variety ideally suited to Kutch’s aridity, and grown organically. The group has worked out the full value chain – from cultivation to the marketing of cloth – creating a robust demand. Such institutions have also helped to diversify products – from carpets and shawls to saris and stoles, shirts and kurtas, linen, bags – and new design or handloom schools have enabled formal learning for young weavers.

The *vannat* revival has brought economic prosperity, but unevenly. Vankars who live close to Bhuj town or in villages where external agencies have intervened have benefited more than others. Distress is still visible among many vankars. And there is a visible class divide too between entrepreneur weavers and weavers who work for them. “Such inequality was rare a few decades ago when the craft was mostly for local trade,” says Shamjibhai Siju of Bhujodi, a prominent innovator who has travelled the world promoting the Kutchi weave.

Changing trends

But the revival has brought in significant social changes. Vankars have traditionally suffered from untouchability and other manifestations of casteism; but today, due to economic transformation, contact with the outside world, education, and new opportunities for the youth, they do not experience its worst forms.

Equally apparent is the impact on gender. Traditionally, women did all the pre-loom work, such as getting the yarn ready, while men did the weaving. Now, women sit at the loom too, and express their own creativity. Some have begun going out to melas (fairs). Champa Siju Vankar of Awadhnagar weaves some of her own designs and recently exhibited her work in the U.K. as part of an exchange programme. In Adhoi village, Jaishreeben got married into a non-weaving family, and taught her husband Habbubhai how to weave; the two now make saris side-by-side. But there is an ironic flip side: because men hardly step up to help with the housework, the women weavers are now doubly busy.

And has the *vannat* revival been positive for the environment? Kala cotton has only half the total ecological ‘footprint’ (in terms of carbon emissions and water use) compared to Bt cotton, which has taken over most cotton acreage in

Gujarat, says ecologist Arun Mani Dixit. However, since the market for Kala cotton products is now mostly in Indian metros and in Europe, there is an increased footprint of transportation. And an uncomfortable and vulnerable dependence on elite consumers.

Vankar leaders like Shamjibhai and Murjibhai of Bhujodi feel the need for intervention on some of these issues: assisting weavers in villages far from Bhuj to access the market, reviving local demand, and collective mobilisation on policies adversely impacting them like GST. With these in place, the *vannat* revival story could become even more remarkable.

The author visited Kutch as part of a collaborative study (ACKnowl-EJ) by Kalpavriksh, Khamir and the community, supported by the International Social

Science Council.

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