

ANALYSIS WOMEN

In Kutch, Women Are Weaving a New Future for Themselves

Women are questioning the shackles of patriarchy while taking forward traditional handloom weaving.



Women weaving on the loom at Avadhagar. Credit: Ashish Kothari

Radhika Mulay



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Questio

Earlier, for a woman to operate the loom and weave was frowned upon. Now women are confidently asserting their aspirations to weave independently. Many women are now exploring acrylic, kala cotton (indigenous and organic cotton variety) and even plastic weaving as a source of livelihood. Plastic weaving, introduced by the Kutch-based innovation group Khamir to reduce the ecological impact of plastic waste, created an impetus for women to develop their weaving skills and understand markets. Now, plastic

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en unrecognised and unpaid for atriarchal nature of the though, with the changing trends on, and increasing interactions omen have started changing the s at their contributions.

weaving is practised by women in Avadhnagar and other villages. It has resulted in a growth of women self-help groups with better access to micro credits.

Today, we find women entrepreneurs like Hansaben Meria from Rampar Vekra, Kankuben Amritlal Vankar from Kukma, Jaishreeben Harijan from Adhoi who have established their mark as skilled weavers in acrylic as well as kala cotton weaving. They are even providing jobs to other women from their community. They travel across India and abroad for exhibitions and shows, increasing their range of exposure and network. Champa Siju Vankar and Rajjiben Harijan of Avadhnagar took some of their own designs to a textile exchange programme in UK.



Designs inspired by the Rann of Kutch, created by Rajjiben and Champa for a UK exchange programme. Credit: Champa Vankar

In Adhoi, Prakash Bijal Vankar has set up a separate loom for his wife. Jaishreeben taught her husband to weave and has set up a new system of weaving livelihood in a non-vankar family. Sanjot Sheetal Hitesh, Buchia Roshni Pachan from Jamthada, Champa from Avadhnagar and many other

young girls are confidently voicing their aspirations to pursue weaving as a full-time profession.

“Instead of working in a factory, I would prefer that my daughter works from home on a loom. It is much safer and convenient,” said a father who is proud of his daughter’s contribution to the weaving tradition and the economic status of the family.



Jaishreeben from Adhoi. Credit: Ashish Kothari

This new energy and perspective seen in designs, products, are transforming the already flourishing Vanaat. In situations where people are moving away from traditional livelihoods, this community effort, combined with the determination from women, is providing an alternative to the otherwise mainstreams occupations.

Gender empowerment

By no means is the revival of weaving the only or perhaps even the main reason for women’s empowerment. Official policies and programmes, including reservation, access to education, civil society programmes, are other factors. But Khamir’s intervention in the weaving sector has definitely opened new doors for women. “*Sanstha ke vajah se hume*

swabhiman se jeena ka rasta mila,” said Rajjiben, a single mother who was able to support her family through weaving and a Khamir employee.

Increasing sense of pride and confidence among women is reflected in the political and social spaces as well. “As women, we understand the requirements of our homes and village better. We are able to provide better solutions to improve village governance and infrastructure,” says Jassuben Khimji Vankar, from Bhujodi.

Kankuben Amritlal Vankar, from Kukma, a national award winner for her woven sari in 2011, proudly narrated her journey of being a sarpanch and how she overcame challenges. Lakshmi Gagubhai Mandar, a vankar, stood as sarpanch with the aim of doing ‘seva’ for the community.

Contradictory trends

While it is important to applaud the struggles of these successful women, there are also some challenges which need to be addressed collectively. A refreshing level of confidence in few villages was countered by cases of women with lower confidence levels elsewhere. There is no necessary connection between being a vankar and being politically empowered. There are many girls who would rather leave traditional roles to join other sectors. This preferences could force the otherwise family-oriented livelihood into one based on outsourcing and/or on centralised production units.

There are also some women who have been taught to weave in order to increase family income. A women weaver highlighted the need for a fundamental change in sharing roles and responsibilities between different genders. She said, “It is wonderful that I am able to weave and innovate, but I also have to manage household responsibilities. There is too much burden.” In some villages, though women

operate the loom, they are supposed to be hidden with a *purdah*.



Woman making a 'sandhani': a process of joining two yarns to begin weaving. Photo: Champa Vankar

Need for new interventions

In spite of these contradictions, it is important to notice that times are changing. There is more freedom in various ways. Young girls are persistently questioning the rigid nature of the marriage system, lifestyle, career options and are becoming assertive for their rights. They hope for continued enhancement in livelihood options.

With persistent efforts and patience, women vankars feel that the long-standing patriarchal nature of community could be undone. As explained by Champa, "Weaving is not just a physical and mental task. One must also put one's heart into

it. If the yarn gets tangled, it has to be unfurled with patience and heart.”



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.

Radhika Mulay works with Kalpavriksh.



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