

Acknowledgements

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Reader's note

We had an opportunity to visit Bhuj on the 27th and 28th of September for an ethnography field trip. During these two days, we conducted research on some of the most prominent craft places like Ajrakhpur, Khamir, and Nirona.

Bhuj, the headquarters of the largest district in India . Kutch is a major tourist destination for a variety of handicrafts. With its desert climate, it experiences unbroken sunshine throughout the year. The area is relieved of the scorching sun during the monsoons.

In 2001, an earthquake devastated Bhuj and its adjoining villages on the morning of India's Republic Day. The Mw 7.7 earthquake was one the most brutal intraplate earthquakes ever recorded. The trauma from the tragedy did not hold any bounds to the people of Bhuj. After two decades, Bhuj has rebuilt itself, restoring the economy, and infrastructure and reviving its heritage simultaneously.

Ajrakhpur is home to Kutchi artisans who do traditional block printing. The village got its name from the art that flourishes here- Ajrakh. The aftermath of the disaster led the artisans

to move from Dhamadka and relocate, building a self-sufficient village. The artisans who have been practicing the 4000-year-old art originally hail from the Sindh province of Pakistan.

Nirona, 40 km away from Bhuj features an ancient art- Rogan that originated from Persia, and a variety of indigenous crafts like bell metal craft, embroidery, lacquer, rogan and leather. The 'Nir' in Nirona means water and 'ona' means deep. It has a population of over seven thousand, with people belonging to different communities like the 'Ahirs', 'Bhanushali', 'Harijans', 'Khatris', 'Luhars', and 'Rajputs'. The population mainly relies on agriculture and handicraft for their livelihood.

Khamir, located 15 km from Bhuj, is a craft resource centre truly living up to its name. 'Khamir' means 'intrinsic pride' in the local language. The centre connects artisans, suppliers, buyers, and art lovers under one roof. The institution aims to be sustainable in its architecture by incorporating earth-based technologies and selling traditional eco-friendly handicrafts.





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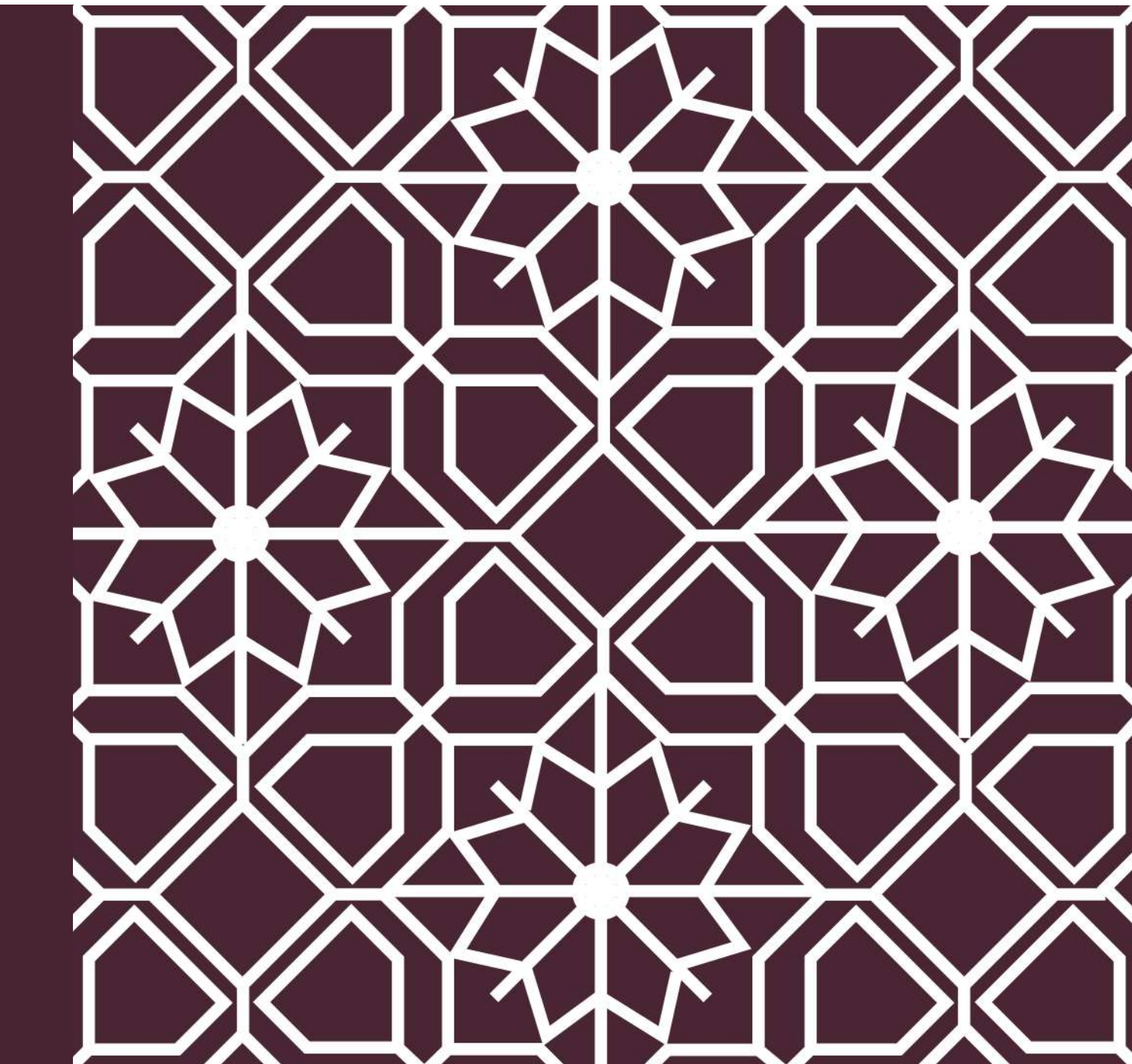
ART RAKE

Aaj Rakh, Ajrakh
blocks of indigo dreams
dyed under the
dessert sky
flows through the
poetic hands of the Khatri's
while the world outside
goes by ...

Riddhi M

It's all around us
the patterns draped over my shoulders
adorned by the magic of alum
beauty of which one cannot
fathom.

Maitri G, Mukta G,





Spaarsh



Basking



Embrace



Unique to Ajrakhpur is its namesake art Ajrakh. A popular story follows that a king loved his blockprinted bedspread so much that he insisted the maids to keep it for one more day, uttering the words 'Aaj rakh'. This phrase is believed to have given the craft its name. Another belief is that the name derives from the Sanskrit word 'A -jharat', translating as 'one that does not fade'. The Arabic word 'Azraq' or 'blue' plays a massive role in the etymology of the word owing to the abundant use of indigo in the prints.



Blended



Out of sight, in your mind



Sealed

This ageless art practiced by the Khatri community traces its origins back 4000 years ago. King Rao Bharmal ji-I, then king of Kutch, invited the craftspeople from Sindh, Pakistan to Kutch. The craftspeople settled at Dhamadka; a barren village allotted by the king. It was an ideal place for the production of Ajrakh. The environment was suitable to grow indigo while the river provided enough water for dyeing. In 2001, Bhuj experienced a massive earthquake. The catastrophe brought destruction to life and livelihood. The ecology of the place also changed; underground water was no longer suitable for natural dyeing.



All Photographs : Om B



Grid in grid

Om B



It's all around us

Om B



Identity



Pigmented

Ajrakhpur is now home to over 100 families, the majority of which practice the art of double-sided block printing. This double-sided print is done by the resist printing method. The long painstaking method produces some of the most exquisite designs. Its printing process can differ from craftsperson to craftsperson. The more traditional method involves over eight stages. In the first stage of creating Ajrakh, the cotton cloth is washed several times to remove the starch content. It is kept in a solution of camel dung, soda ash, and castor oil. The cloth is dried overnight. When the cloth is semi-dried it is soaked in the solution again.

This process is repeated several times until the cloth foams when rubbed. For a final finish, it is soaked in water which is known as Saaj. The next stage follows the process of Kasanu where the cloth is prepared for dyeing. To do so the cloth is dyed in a cold solution of Myrobalan. This solution acts as a mordant in the dyeing process.



Madhura K



An outline of motifs is created on the cloth by resist printing in the Khariyanu stage. A resist of lime and Arabic gum is printed on both sides of the cloth by carved wooden blocks. The outlines created are white and are known as Rekh.

Om B



Madhura K



A layer of black printing is done with Kat paste. To make the paste the craftsperson mixes scrap iron, and jaggery with water and leaves it for fermentation. They add tamarind seed powder to this ferrous water and boil it into a paste. The paste is again printed on both sides of the cloth.



Chhap

Gach is the stage that combines two resist printing processes. A paste of alum, clay, and gum is used for printing the red color areas. At the same time, a resist of lime and gum Arabic is printed. The craftspeople sprinkle sawdust on the cloth to protect the colour from smudging and leave it to dry for several days. Indigo- which gives the craft its identity is made in the next stage. The cloth is dyed in a bath made of an indigo vat, indigo dye, jaggery, and water. The yellow-coloured solution produces the best quality indigo dye while green produces a medium-quality dye. To remove all the excess, unfixed dye and resist print, the cloth is washed thoroughly and laid flat to dry. The artisans call this stage Vichharnu. Alum residue produces a yellow colour on the cloth.





To remove all the excess, unfixed dye and resist print, the cloth is washed thoroughly and laid flat to dry. The artisans call this stage Vichharnu. Alum residue produces a yellow colour on the cloth. Depending on the availability of the material, dyeing is then done in a solution of tamarix and either madder or al. Some artisans also use a synthetic madder- alizarin in tamarix powder. Again, this dyed cloth is dried flat in the sun. In the last stage of Rang, the red and black areas of the motifs develop, and resist areas come out as white.







Dhobhi



Bathe in yellow



Drenched



The midas touch



Enduring sun



Indulged



A Banjara

Khamir

Om B



Kamakshi H



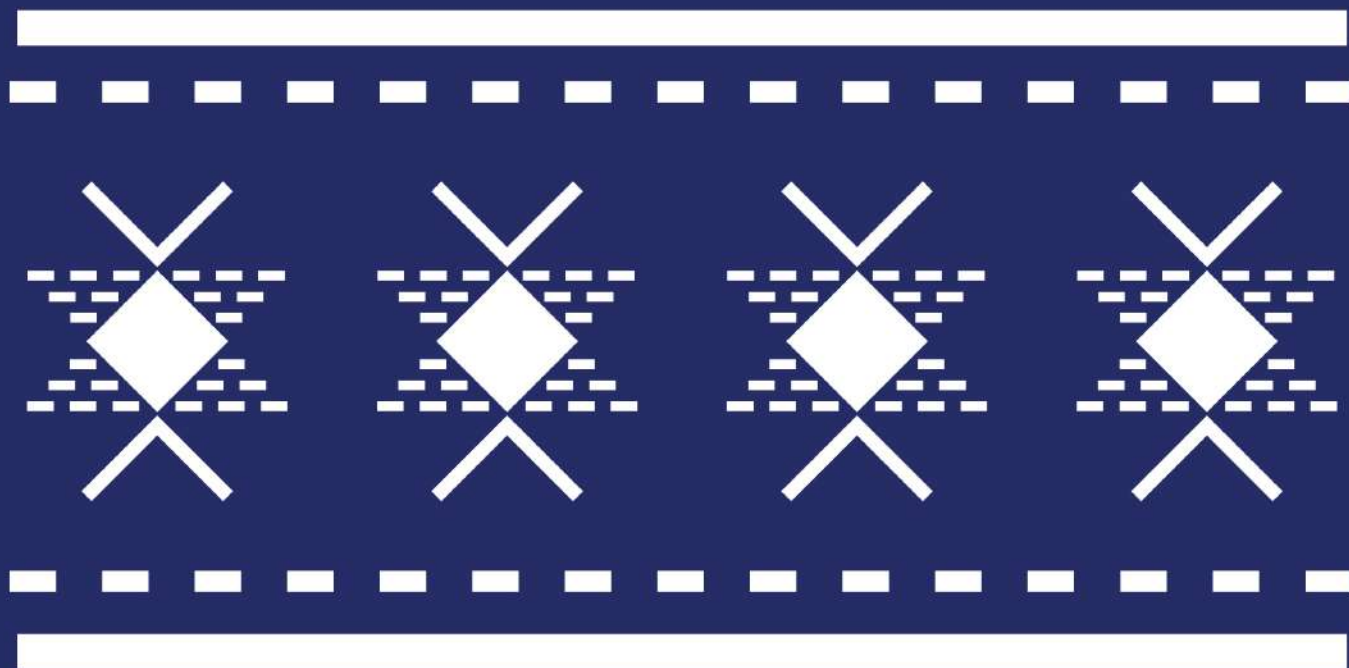
Om B



Renowned for its promotion of sustainability in craft, Khamir creates a space for artisans to develop traditional Kutchi handicrafts. Khamir focuses on printed, and woven textiles, lacquered wood, leather art, metal craft, pottery, and other local craft skills.

We weave the robe of the future
reusing our trash
each weft of our mid night snack
One piece at a time
will have the weavers suffice
Recycling at its best
am I right?

Maitri G, Mukta G





Looking through denim



Drip



Wrapping colours

Resourcefulness is a traditional practice in all rural communities. Khamir sought to repurpose plastic waste into usable goods through traditional handloom weaving. This initiative gave employment to not only handloom weavers but also plastic waste collectors. Waste collected from nearby industries, and schools, is cleaned and segregated based on its colour and quality. The artisans then cut this plastic into long strips. These strips act as wefts and nylon is used as warp. The combination of both creates a very durable textile.



Recycling present, weaving future



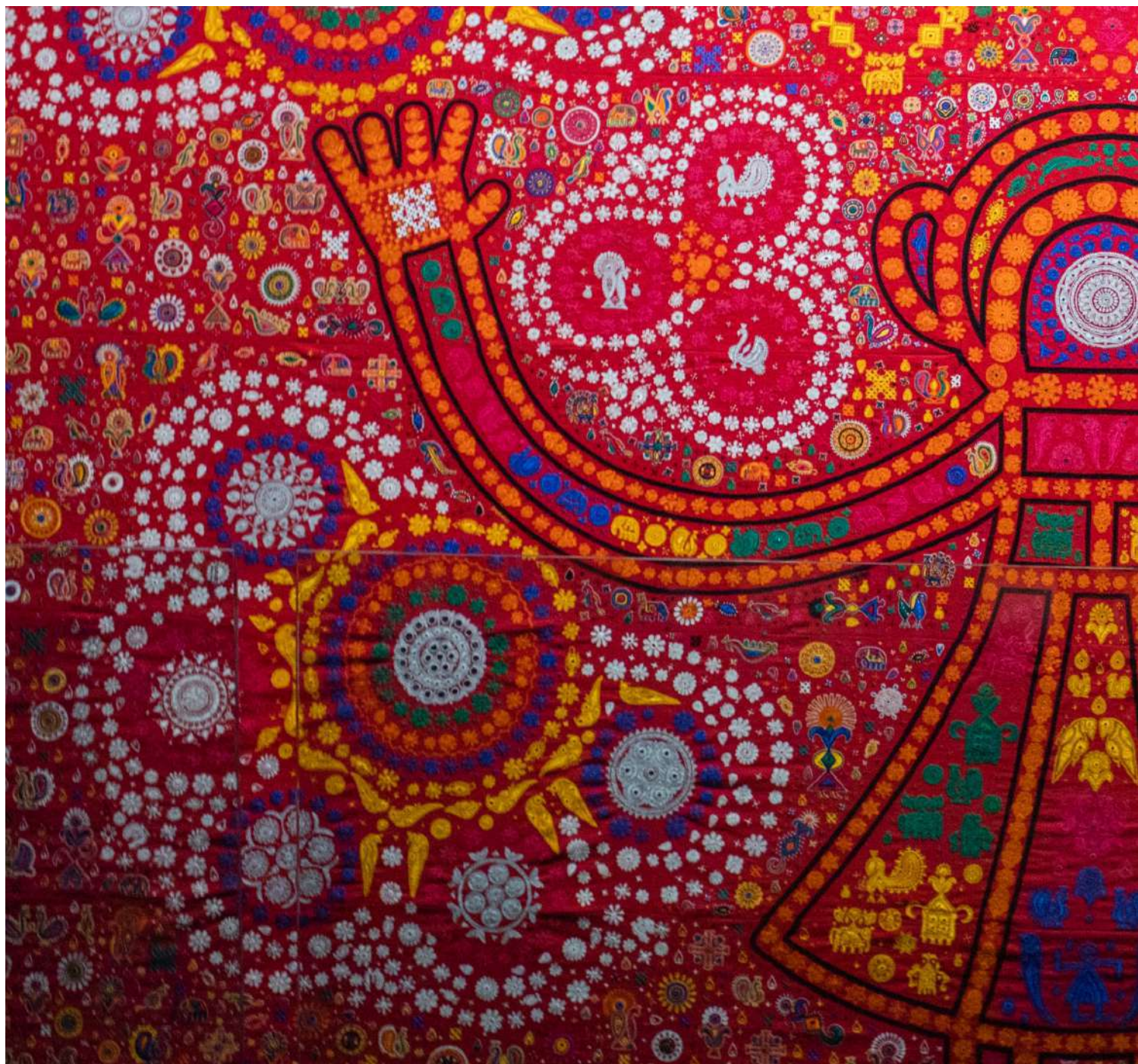
Black and white

The Kala Cotton initiative is another program that rebuilt the cultural, ecological, and economic relations within various traditional communities of Kutch. Indigenous to Kutch, the kala cotton crop is hardy, rain-fed, resistant to drought, and requires minimal investment. Weavers however find it hard due to its short staple length producing few twists per inch of yarn. Years of experimentation resulted in perfecting the spinning and weaving techniques producing soft and tenacious textiles. The initiative reinstated the use of this desi, sustainable cotton in the industry.



Something's cooking

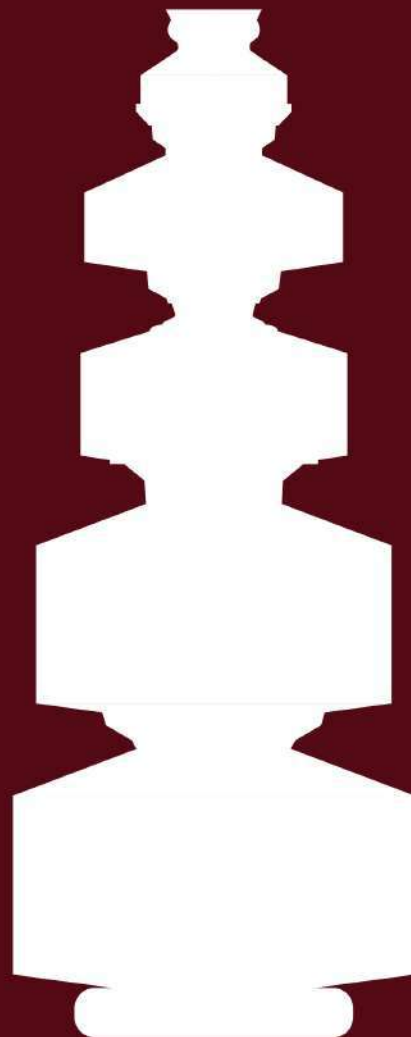
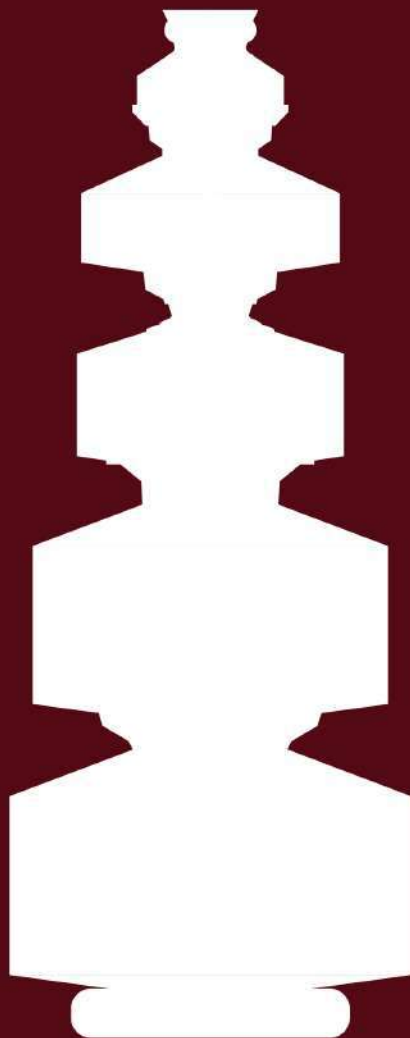
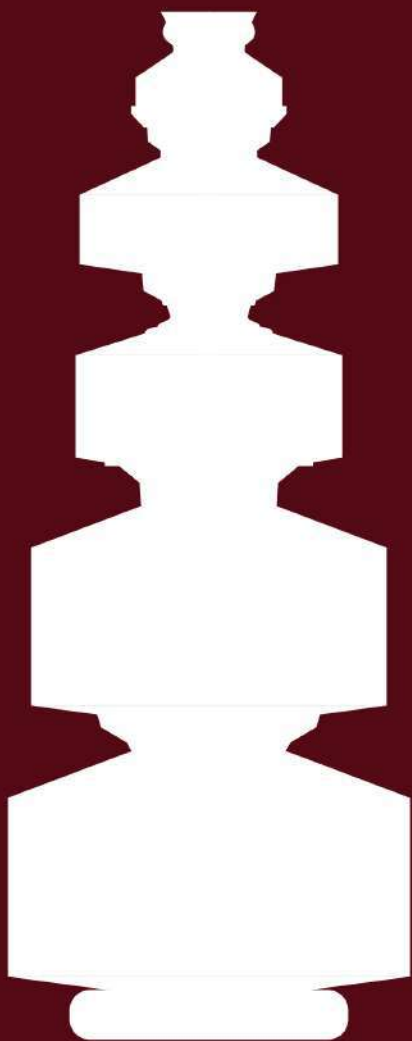
Khamir was built to strengthen the identity of the people, building a network for local artisans, and consumers worldwide. They create a supply chain between raw material producers, various craftspeople involved in the process, and consumers. Their motto caters to raising the cultural value of traditional crafts and allied cultural practices. The NGO was built with dreams of preserving and encouraging Kutch's diverse cultural ecology and has expanded its vision to provoke sustainability in the craft sector.





Alive beauties of Kutch under a roof
more than a museum
it's an inspiration tool
Promoting and learning the artisans grow
Nurturing the art of race
Shrujan is here to grace.

Maitri G, Mukta G





Pachaas karegar Ek karegari



Poshakh



Basta



The Living and Learning Design Centre (LLDC) was started by Shrujan to preserve, and revitalize the craft heritage of Kutch. In its vision to enhance the skill of artisans, the resource center acts as a multi-dimensional place for craft documentation, hands-on learning, and a public museum. LLDC is an oasis for artisans, housing over 3 galleries, a library, and a crafts studio. The museum displays hand embroideries of various communities like Ahir, Meghwaad, Gurjar, Rabaari, and many more.





The exhibits display breathtaking embroidery pieces done by craftswomen. Each community has a distinct style of embroidery. Sub-groups within the community have different embroidery styles. The institution has played a major role in empowering women kaarigars to use their skills to become self-sufficient. The place serves as an inspiration for craftspeople and designers to incorporate an amalgamation of traditional embroidery with contemporary designs.

Om B



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Laal

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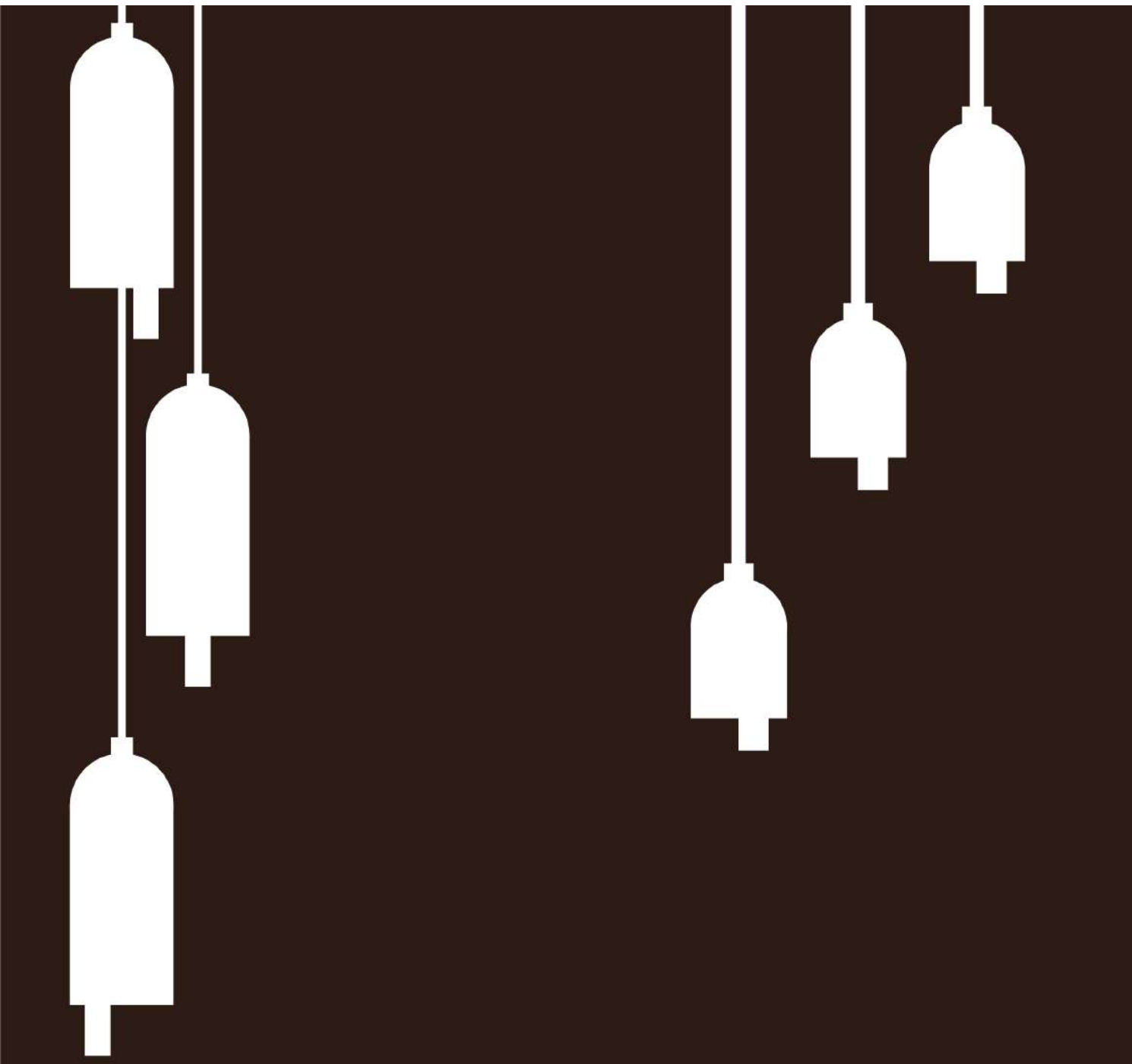




BELL METAL

From sheet to a bell
hands of Luhar sell
Tunes he binds
without a weld

Maitri G, Mukta G





Morchang

They sold their bells to local communities and customized the product according to their needs. The owners could identify the cattle with sounds that had been specified.

From time immemorial, humans have had close ties with livestock, be it for farming or rearing. One craft that arose for the livestock was the craft of bell metals, (locally known as Ghantadi in Kutchi) done by the Lohar community. With its roots in Sindh, bell metal craft flourished in India as the community migrated.





Naad



Rapid urbanization saw a shift in the use of bell metal. They were used as decorative items, wind chimes, keychains, and even doorbells. Artisans saw potential in the diversification of the products and now also make finely tuned musical instruments, including morchang.



Sargam



The entire family engages in the process of bell-making. The men first beat scrap iron sheets into a cylinder of the desired radius. The top dome is beaten into the cylinder. The artisan will make the ear of the bell. The most distinguishing feature of the craft is that it locks the metal into each other without any welding. Women then coat these bells with powdered copper and with the help of mud. The bells are heated in a furnace so that the powdered copper is fixed to the surface. A wooden piece is attached to the center of the bell once it cools down. Tuning of the bell is done by hand and is called denting. This process gives the bell the melodious sounds that it produces.



The future of the craft is volatile in terms of demand. The prospects of growth in income for artisans are scarce. Heavy investments, low-profit margins, tedious labor, and unsteady market demand all have factored into the dwindling of the craft. Many NGOs have reached out and are working on rebuilding the craft's value.





A castor paste who would have thought
would create such a beautiful art
Mirrored motif without mirror
come naturally to the maker
With every twist of his kalam of steel
he brings to life
peacocks and quills
parrots peek from
the tree of life
to watch them work
gives a peaceful vibe.

Maitri G, Mukta G, Riddhi M

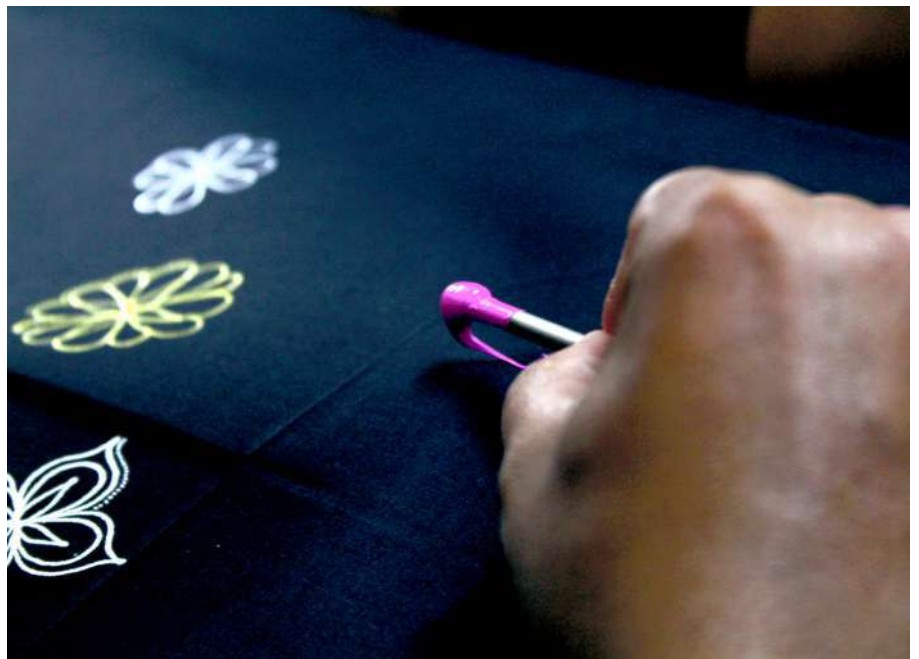




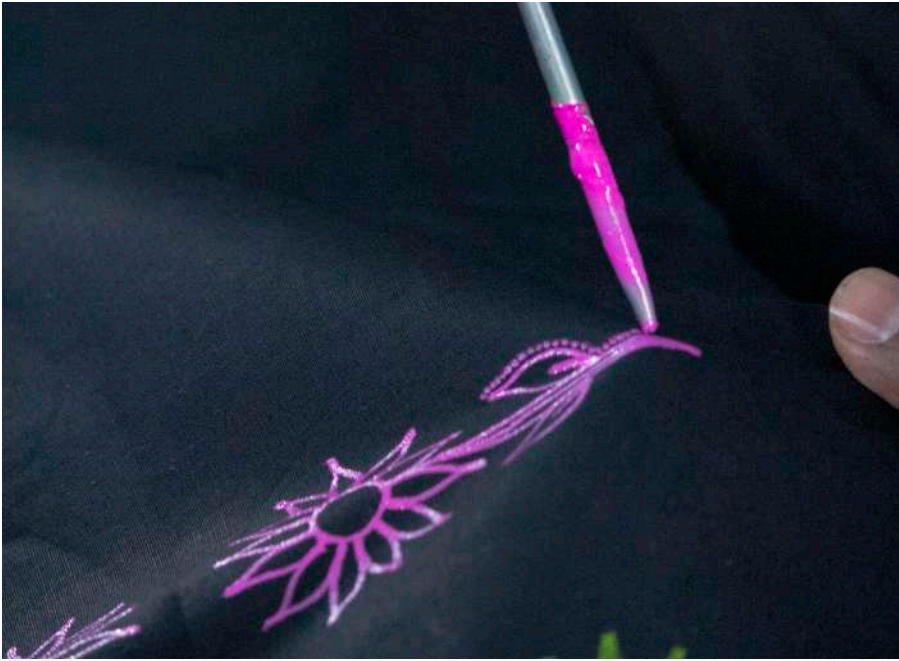
Heritage in hands

Rogan, the craft of surface embellishment is said to have originated in Persia. The art form reached India with the Afridi tribe which traveled across Persia, Afghanistan, and then Pakistan. The descendants of the Khatri community that practice this art, settled in the north-western parts of India.

Now, Abdul Gafur Khatri and his family are the only custodian of this vanishing art. His son is the eighth generation that has continued the practice of rogan art. 'Rogan' means oil in Persian, indicating the base material of the art.



Precision



Meticulous

Castor oil is heated up for over 6 hours a day. Then they mix the oil well with a wooden rod to check for the necessary consistency. The process is repeated once again if the oil does not meet the required consistency. The process can take up to 2-3 days. The vibrant colors of rogan are made by mixing pigment mineral colors into the thickened oil.

They take the necessary amount of color, mix it with water and grind it thoroughly. This makes the colors very polished. The ground color is added to the oil with a binding agent. To maintain the consistency of the paste and to prevent dust from accumulating, the paste is stored in small containers.



Practise practise practise



Natural all around

The most unique feature of the craft is the method of 'air weaving'. The artist takes a portion of paste on the base of his palm and with the help of a metal stylus called kalam, draws the motifs. The drawings are done by tailing threads of paste, without the kalam ever touching the cloth. They paint the designs over a dark-colored cloth to bring out the vibrancy.

The striking intricate designs are never pre-drawn. The motifs, color combinations, and patterns all come to the artist naturally on the go. The symmetrical patterns are done by drawing motif on half the cloth and folding it to get a mirror image. The most famous symmetrical rogan artwork is the tree of life which has multiple variations. This speciality of fine, authentic work is inculcated in the artist from the beginning.



Prints of Kutch



Drying out

In the olden days, Rogan was done on ceremonial clothing like the bridal outfits of local tribes, the borders of ghagras (skirts), odhanis, and bedspreads to enhance their beauty. The artisans saw a larger demand for art as ornamentation rather than clothing. They now translate rogan on cushion covers, bedspreads, tablecloths, and wall hangings including ethnic wear. Such ornamental pieces take weeks sometimes months to complete.

Rogan is currently recognized as a unique intricate fine art. The family collaborates with many NGOs to set up workshops for women to increase their inclusion in the art. They constantly work on improving the designs and diversifying the mediums to stay relevant in the contemporary world.



The tree of life

