

The gap between tech and THE ARTISAN

The digital world is a confounding space for craftspeople trying to come to grips with social media, smartphones

Shefalee Vasudev

Among the few things that inspired optimism in the rubble of the pandemic's devastation of industries, small and big, was the "digital empowerment" of the Indian craftspeople. "Being online" was no longer about hashtag-happy selfie brats from the smartphone-friendly younger generation of artisan families.

This was a new battleground—the digital wiring and rewiring of India's crafts and cultural industries, filled with the jargon of webinars, online exhibitions, digital workshops and relief funds, pointing to a new page in retail history. Across the country, collectives and non-profits rolled up their sleeves to train craftspeople in ways to click photographs, use social media, write product descriptors, work on Google sheets and sign up with payment gateways to boost sales.

GoCoop, India's first online marketplace for craftspeople, launched in 2012, turned mentor. Khamir, a Kutch-based platform for crafts and heritage, reached out to GoCoop to train artisans, and collaborated with Creative Dignity, launched last year by a group of professionals to provide relief to artisans hit by covid-19. Dastkar, a society for crafts and craftspeople led by the astute Laila Tyabji, started its online store in September. Tata Trusts' crafts-based livelihood initiative Antaran, forced by the pandemic to temporarily shutter its incubation and design centres, carried on virtual communication and training through its YouTube channel, Antaran Knowledge Centre.

Specialised platforms like the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), founded by Osama Manzar, highlighted the urgent need to provide digital training to craftspeople. With the Commonwealth of Learning, an intergovernmental organisation created to promote open learning, DEF created a baseline survey, reaching out to 2,000 weavers and craftspeople and publishing an endline study, *Improving Livelihoods Of Rural Weavers Through Digital Training*, to map the results.

There are many such instances of digital interventions but this is not a story about the birthing of India's Crafts-Silicon Valley. For while the technological training of the craftspeople is a progressive step, it is fraught with deep knowledge gaps, inequalities of position, education, information and ownership (of mobile devices, to begin with). If metaphors compel you, imagine the scenario of Purani Dilli's open and low-hanging electrical



wiring before its architectural makeover—every loose wire lighting a bulb somewhere, but the circuitry carrying the threat of sparks, shocks, even blackouts.

"While it is true that digital skilling gives a chance to everyone to reach out to the consumer directly, extends democratic rights and opportunity, it is an extremely layered knowledge phenomenon," says Manzar. From the financial burden on artisans to the complexities of retail supply chains they know little about, vast inequalities are a play.

A LONG ROAD AHEAD

Language is among the first hurdles. While most craftspeople use the English script to write in Hindi on WhatsApp, this cannot be used for product catalogue descriptors. If you view shops and sellers of Indian weaves and crafts on Instagram, an unequal universe opens up. Images of crumpled or folded woven saris, photographed from unflattering angles, appear with captions like "Im direct weavers" (@warpeftchanderisaree). Or, "Handloom and couture manufacturer" (@fairy_weaves_chanderi) or @kanjevaram_silkhouse with the tag "Weavers Place". Dozens of such posts must compete for attention with A-league brands like Raw Mango or Gaurang. On the one hand, semi-literate craftspeople, learning to handle the smartphone with sketchy 3G networks. On the other, established brands that can buy technology, stylists, content writers, professional photographers and campaign directors.

Differences will persist

and, in fact, help the market mature. For the moment, however, the hurried digital debuts of craftspeople have also led to issues of fakes in the name of weavers' products and confusing variations in pricing. The same (or similar) Chanderi sari on Instagram, for instance, can cost you anything from ₹6,500 to ₹35,000. The buyer has no way to ascertain authenticity.

A few months ago, designer Gaurang Shah confronted a seller from Maharashtra who was selling Paithani saris on Instagram using images from the designer's show at the Lakmé Fashion Week for their visual campaign.

"When we started working, we realised a majority of artisans don't use the digital medium. Making them tech-enabled cannot happen overnight and till the market matures, yes, there is the danger of fakes, even of artisans undercutting their own business or taking advantage of the situation," says crafts consultant Meera Goradia, one of the founders of Creative Dignity. "It is not just about posting a video, it involves product customisation, managing a portal, learning to work on Google slides or spreadsheets for inventory management, protection and secure payment wallets."

Khamir's deputy director Ghatit Laheru says that while some established Kutch artisans do sell online, most are not interested in developing digital skills. "We organised a professional studio with a proper photography setup for local artisans to use but few showed interest," he says.

The issue is far more complex in Kashmir, says Shruti Jagota, project head of the Commitment to Kashmir (CtoK)



ABNER MANZAR/DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION



(clockwise, from above) The Digital Empowerment Foundation has helped train 40 Pattamadai mat weavers; online spaces are helping artisans reach customers; and Assam's Jyotshna Kalita is one of the weavers who turned to social media to sell their creations during the pandemic.

Trust, which works with artisans on capacity building, design and skill development. "Mobile connectivity was an issue till recently, with 2G network that slowed down the speed of uplinking products within delivery deadlines (4G has now been restored). The difficulty of teaching online marketing through webinars, the paucity of professional product photographers in Kashmir, problems of packaging products for shipment, inventory management and trying to 'connect' with faceless customers, is easier said than done," says Jagota. She cites the example of CtoK's e-commerce platform Zaina, saying it is a challenge to interpret this world for artisans traditionally used to selling in crafts bazaars.

The deeper you dig, the more you realise how intimidating it is for artisans. Even on a platform like Amazon, an artisan is only given a relationship manager to help navigate the retail complexities of the vast e-commerce marketplace if they have over 40 products to display and sell.

Smaller sellers must figure out the space themselves, something that is not feasible for them, says Jagota.

The distance between the Indian artisan's recent introduction to technology and modern technological knowledge on data protection and design copyright is huge. So it is with the growing global shift towards blockchain technology (enabling the permanent recording and tracking of product information across the supply chain). This is why it is now as important for crafts welfare organisations to enable digital prowess as teach design diversification and quality. However, like Purani Dilli's knotted electric wires that manage to light up bazaars, there is light here too—and not necessarily at the end of the tunnel.

The DEF survey underlines as much. Conducted across eight states, it studied 974 of the 2,000 artisans trained during covid-19. A total of 80% said digital training was important, 75% said reaching customers online helped during the lockdown, and 74% started taking pictures and videos of their products after training. What's more, 65% were aware of digital wallets and 93% of 510 respondents started using social media for business.

"Last month, we trained 40 female mat weavers in Pattamadai. Each arrived with their smartphones, and within minutes of launching Google Meets, they were talking to each other online," says Manzar.

Time, perhaps, then to "like" the emerging technological middlemen in the lives of Indian artisans: welfare-minded, tech-savvy mentor-collaborators who are co-authoring the new development story.

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India's Mahindra Racing looks for the winning spark

Can the only Indian team in Formula E make it big in a championship year?

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As the sporting calendar begins filling up, the buzz in motorsport continues to revolve around Formula One (F1). But over two days, starting 26 February, season 7 of Formula E has ushered in a new chapter for the competition. For Formula E, the single-seater motorsport competition that uses only electric cars, was granted championship status by the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), the governing body of motorsport, in November.

This milestone means the competition—with its high-speed, electric street-racing format—will rub shoulders with F1, the World Rally Championship, World Endurance Championship and World Rallycross Championship in international single-seater motor racing. Twelve teams are vying for the championship—among them, India's Mahindra Racing.

The team has been part of the Formula E ecosystem since the inaugural 2014-15 season. Over the last six seasons, the Banbury-based outfit has slowly become a mainstay in the competition. "We are

really excited about the world championship status. It's really important that we have done it in six, short years... (As a team), we have now put our feet in motorsport for the last six years, but we still have the opportunity to become the first (Formula E) world champions. So, the motivation is there," Dilbagh Gill, team principal and CEO, Mahindra Racing, says during a video call from Boston, US.

Since the 2014-15 season, the team has managed four race wins and 18 podium finishes from 69 races. Their high point was undoubtedly the 2016-17 season, when they finished third in the team standings. Season 6, Gill admits, was a disaster as they finished ninth among 12 teams. "I don't want to give any excuses. We messed up the whole season," he says.

So it's a fresh start of sorts for both Formula E, with its new championship status, and Mahindra Racing, which has an exciting new car and driver line-up. Over the years, it has had experienced drivers, including many with stints in F1—Karun Chandhok, Jérôme d'Ambrosio, Pascal Wehrlein and Nick Heidfeld. Season 7 has the all-British duo of Alexander Sims and Alex Lynn at the wheel of the M7Electro. "In terms of changes between the M6Electro and the M7, they are one of the biggest we have ever done over the last seven years. We have literally changed every part in the car and worked closely with our new supplier, (German manufacturer) ZF,



The M7Electro is Mahindra Racing's car for the new Formula E season.

COURTESY MAHINDRA RACING

on designing the power train," says Gill. The power train, key in Formula E cars, has three main components: the motor, inverter and gearbox. The inverter, says Gill, has a lot of the fun stuff. "A lot of our software is actually sitting in the inverter. "It converts the DC current of a battery to AC for the motor, and vice versa... When we are regenerating (power, also known as 'regen') while braking, it converts the AC power. At the same time, it needs to switch on and switch off in microseconds." Such

minuscule settings, driven by technology and astute sporting decisions, are what make Formula E challenging.

The competition comes with its own set of fascinating rules and regulations. An E-Prix, or race, is 45 minutes long, plus one lap. The highlight are the electric cars, and that's where aspects like "Attack Mode" and "Fanboost" come into play.

The former, introduced in the 2018-19 season, allows a driver to pick up an extra dose of power. To do so, they must arm

their car and drive off the racing line through an "Activation Zone". As reward for taking a slower racing line, they are able to collect an extra 35 kW of power, which can be used for a few laps when they want to defend or overtake an opponent.

The qualifying format is different too. Drivers are divided into four groups based on a reverse championship standing order; there are five qualifying sessions. The fastest are at the front and the slowest at the back. During group qualify-

ing sessions, each driver gets just one flying lap to set a time. At the end, the six fastest drivers go out one by one for a super pole shoot-out, which decides the starting order for the top six. You essentially get one shot at starting at the front.

Both Sims and Lynn are versatile drivers with an impressive qualifying record. "They are both very fast, super qualifiers," says Gill. This year, the complexities of covid-19 too played a role in the choice of drivers. Since both Sims and Lynn are based in the UK, they could spend more time in the simulator and work with the team at its base in Banbury.

The continued presence of F1 drivers has helped Formula E and Gill hopes that as a team, Mahindra Racing can drive its popularity in India. He uses the example of the Force India F1 team. "I really admire what Force India did. They always punched above their weight," says Gill. "I think we have become the authentic Indian motorsport team and never shied away from our Indian identity."

With names such as Porsche and Mercedes entering Formula E, Gill admits the stakes are higher. Season 7 offers Mahindra Racing a chance at a fresh start but the margin for error is small. As Gill says: "I think we are in a position where I don't call ourselves an underdog. There were a lot of learnings from season 6 and the slate is kind of wiped clean now. But we have to take the reset button very seriously."