

An In-depth Exploration of the Traditional Craft of Hand Block Printing in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: Hand block printing is an ancient printing technique; its designs provide an interesting combination of delicacy and intricacy. This study aims an in-depth exploration of the traditional craft of Hand Block Printing in Pakistan and intends to provide detailed insight of the technique and process of hand block printing and its downfall.

Methodology: It is qualitative research and is compiled as case study specially focusing on one active hub of this craft, Kehrro Pakka. All the data is gathered from interviews of native artisans of Kahrro Pakka in South Punjab. Visuals of printing and block making process are also shared to enhance understandability.

Findings: Hand block printing is a traditional craft of Pakistan which is fading due to lack of finances and recognition. There is a need to take measures on a larger scale to boost this craft because it has the potential to give huge benefit to the country.

Conclusion: Study concluded that it is a part of our culture and dwells in traditions from centuries, so we need to take measures to preserve our identity. There is a dire need to invest in this tremendous traditional craft in terms of research, education, training, business, and recognition so that it can flourish.

Keywords: Exploration, Traditional Craft, Hand Block Printing.

Introduction

Hand block printing is a technique of printing a piece of fabric by repeatedly pressing carved, dye-coated wooden blocks on it. Where block is used as a stamp that produces mirror image of carving. It is believed that block printing originated in China around 4,000 years ago and quickly expanded throughout South Asia and the rest of the world. However, the Diamond Sutra, a book that was published 300 years before the Gutenberg Bible, has the very first instance of block printing (Ganguly & Amrita, 2018).

In South Asia, in the region of subcontinent hand block printing is present as an ancestral craft. But here its history is patchy because it is based on what conquerors recorded. However as far as history tells us, the story starts with Babur, a Ghengis Khan ancestor who lived in present-day Uzbekistan. He founded the Mughal Dynasty in India at the beginning of 16th century, who ruled more than 200 years and whose

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influence lasted much longer. The Mughal style defined a significance amount of Indian art as we know it today, influencing everything from block printing to Taj Mahal. The Mughal monarchs showered support on the arts throughout their empire (Sharan et al., n.d.). Their art and design have a distinctive personality. Block printing was one of the favorites of the Mughal emperors. Their lavish taste in textiles is well-known. Since the Mughals' rule, block printing techniques have mostly remained the same—at least when printing is still done by hand. The majority of block-printed textiles are produced using direct, resist, or discharge printing. Each print run begins with a hand-carved wooden block that is created by an artist, who often learns the craft from their family (Greru & Kalkreuter, 2017). A deft but delicate touch is required for the task. For every component of a pattern, such as a border, a group of leaves, or a floral shape, a block is carved by the carver.

The dye is then applied using one of three methods. The simplest method is the direct one: stamp the fabric after dipping a block in dye. Discharge printing is a technique for producing a white pattern on a colorful background. Printers stamp the hardwood blocks after giving them a simple bleaching chemical to achieve this. Reverse printing is used for resist. The wooden blocks are soaked in a sticky substance and stamped to create a pattern before the final paint is applied. After the paste has dried, it is scraped off, leaving only the design. After the Mughal era, Europeans in India started to establish their dominance, which resulted in the British Raj, which lasted until 1947. Britain started exporting its textiles to India because to the rise of European industrialization, which forced domestic weavers and printers to close their businesses and forced citizens to buy inexpensive knockoffs of their once-icon textiles. In their quest for total dominance, the British physically hacked off the fingers of numerous weavers in India, according to Gopinath. It also presented a threat to the once-vibrant industry.

This study aims an in-depth exploration of the traditional craft of Hand Block Printing in Pakistan. This article provides detailed insight of the technique and process of hand block printing, reasons of its downfall, and suggestions to strengthen this industry

Literature Review

The status of Indian textiles during the British Raj was examined in "The Fabric of India: Textiles in a Changing World," a 2015 exhibition at London's Victoria & Albert Museum. The craft developed into a political statement, the museum claims. Gandhi even insisted that Indians wear khadi, a traditional fabric that has come to represent Indian nationalism, and encourage them to weave their own textiles. When the Raj ended, the textile industry prospered. In order to attend the opening of an exhibition on Indian textiles at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, writer and activist Pupul Jayakar travelled by plane to New York, where she ran across Charles Eames. The two quickly grew close. Soon after, Eames and his wife Ray visited India where they delivered a report to the newly elected government titled "The India Report" that examined how to maintain and develop India's historic craft industries. The leading authority on Indian crafts today is the National Institute of Design, which was founded in 1961 and works nonstop to protect and promote the art form.

The 60 years since the NID's founding have seen a resurgence in interest in block-printed textiles among design lovers. While its global fame was firmly established throughout the Mughal era, Indian textiles have had something of a resurgence abroad, with implications felt in India. The founder of the Indian textile company Marigold Living, Shreya Shah, continues, "So many younger men are entering the printing business." This devotion to handicrafts and extravagant designs blended in beautifully with maximalism, which came and went (and returned) throughout the course of the previous 60 years. The combination of block print and chintz is classic. More Westerns were printed in Jaipur or Ahmedabad as the National Institute of Design gained popularity. John Robshaw, a well-known textile designer and lover of block prints, was one of them while they were at the NID. "To me, these textiles are the same as art," Robshaw continues. "Art is something you use and live with."

Gopinath asserts that these textiles qualify as works of art. When I think about block prints, a few qualities come to mind right away, including good design, colour, composition, and a craftsman's hand

and heart. For Shah, it's largely the same. She claims, "We are aware of the beauty that surrounds us, and I want the rest of the world to be aware of it as well." Under Mughal patronage, the entire textile sector flourished, and many artisans are still at work today in the historic Mughal strongholds of Gujrat and Rajasthan in modern India (Sharan et al., n.d.). Whereas, in Pakistan artisans of hand block printing are there in Sindh (Yang et al., 2018) and district kahrora Pakka of southern Punjab. In Pakistan this industry is facing downfall, while in India it is reawakening.

Methodology

It is a qualitative research and is compiled as case study of Hand Block Printing in Pakistan specially focusing on one active hub of this craft, Kehrora Pakka. All the data is gathered from the interviews of native artisans of Kahrora Pakka, an active hub of hand block printing in lower Punjab. Visuals of printing and block making process are also shared to enhance understandability.

Findings/Discussion

History of Block Printing in Pakistan

The block printing industry has the potential to be very successful. Unfortunately, it is declining in Pakistan. On the other hand, this sector is growing in India. Block and screen printing both originated in East Asia. The earliest block printing tools, dated to 220 AD, were found in ancient China. Block-printing processes were used to produce books, images, and designs on cloth or paper. Screen printing was created in ancient China some 800 years later. In the late 1800s, it made its debut in the world. India introduced the hand block printing technique to Europe, where it immediately gained popularity.

"In 1992, I started studying block printing, and in 1996, I started earning money." Local resident Muhammad Ismail claims, "I worked professionally as a block-printer at Kahrora Pakka, in the Lodhran region of southern Punjab, which is a significant block-printing centre in Pakistan. Block printing has been used on textiles for decades in South Asia. When I first began working professionally, I received a monthly salary of Rs. 300. My ancestors established a block printing business in Kahrora Pakka. The family firm, however, had to be shut down since my father was unable to manage it. I work as a daily wage earner right now. It takes a lot of work to do this job, and it's not very lucrative.

Ismail informs TNS that although this industry is well-known in Kahrora Pakka, it is dwindling as a result of increased raw material costs and the spread of computerised printing. When the historic Sindhi Ajrak was constructed during the Indus Valley Civilization, block printing first occurred in Pakistan.

Block printing work used to be in high demand in Pakistan and Afghanistan, said Fayyaz Ahmed, 50, who runs a block printing company in Kahrora Pakka. He asserts that foreign visitors to the Punjab, especially those who travelled to Lahore, Multan, Bahawalpur, and Islamabad, used to enjoy and purchase traditional goods from handicraft stores. They would buy shawls, bedclothes, and pillows with block prints as souvenirs.

Ismail claims that numerous handicrafts businesses and NGOs would purchase block-printed clothing from neighborhood stores and vendors in Kahrora Pakka, Bahawalpur, and Multan. They would have exhibitions in Islamabad and Lahore and generate substantial profits from the sale of conventional block-printed textiles. Ismail claims that although Kahrora Pakka is a commercially underdeveloped area, it is a powerhouse in terms of agriculture. "In Farrukhabad, Uttar Pradesh, before the partition of India, my family started block printing. Our sixth generation is currently working on this at Kahrora Pakka. A 62-year-old company owner named Haji Muhammad Akbar Chughtai chats with TNS. In Kahrora Pakka, the block-printing sector once provided employment for a sizable number of people. In recent years, many workers have left the sector to start new businesses.

Chughtai claims that the dyes and machinery used in block printing are getting too expensive. He asserts that fruits, vegetables, and herbs are the sources of natural colours. The procedure is too time-consuming for many people. According to Chughtai, natural-color printed covers, cushions, and shawls cost more

than those made with chemical dyes. A block printer uses mostly wooden blocks with different designs carved into them to generate 4 to 5 bed sheets every day. According to Chughtai, artificial colours are now more popular than natural dyes, which were once more popular. If the customer demands natural colors for shawls or wraps, "We charge Rs 1,500 per item for good quality work," he explains. Block printing is traditionally done on cotton cloth, but Chughtai adds that block printing on silk and other materials is becoming more and more popular with consumers.

Around 1,000 people, including workers and business owners, are currently involved in block-printing operations in Kahrora Pakka and the surrounding areas, according to Chughtai. Block printing is common in Sindh, where traditional Sindhi ajrak is made. The process of carving wooden blocks and stamping hasn't changed in Pakistan or India, despite changes to colours, fabrics utilised, and designs.

In forthcoming sections this study discusses about today's craft of hand block printing in Pakistan. Its culture and history based on an interview from native artisan of Kahrora Pakka district. Also, how blocks are made and what is the printing technique here. On the other hand we will try to shed light on downfall of this craft, its reasons, and suggestions about how it can be reawakened.

Hand Block Printing Craft in Pakistan Today

Block printing dates back to the Indus Valley culture in Pakistan. The traditional Sindhi Ajrak has been block-printed for a long time. The country has its own traditional designs and techniques for hand block printing. But the history and majority of activity is still informal and unrecorded (Yang et al., 2018).

"I began learning block printing in 1992 and began making money in 1996." "I worked professionally as a block-printer at Kahrora Pakka, in the Lodhran region of southern Punjab, which is a significant block-printing center in Pakistan," says Muhammad Ismail, a local. "In South Asia, block printing on textiles has been practiced for generations. I got paid Rs. 300 per month when I first started working professionally. In Kahrora Pakka, my forefathers founded a block-printing business. My father, however, was unable to handle the family business, and we were forced to close it down. I'm currently employed as a daily wage earner. This occupation necessitates a great deal of effort and pays relatively little. According to Ismail, many handicrafts' enterprises and NGOs would buy block-printed cloth from local shops and contractors in Kahrora Pakka, Bahawalpur, and Multan. They would have exhibits in Islamabad and Lahore and make large sums selling traditional block-printed fabrics (Khan, 2021). Kahrora Pakka is an agricultural powerhouse but a commercially underdeveloped location.

"Intricate block carving is progressively fading in Pakistan," says Allah Bux, a 70-year-old block craftsman. "Traditional patterns are being made by fewer and fewer craftsmen in Pakistan." The market is now flooded with modern patterns. It takes almost a week to make a wooden block with an original design. It's a time-consuming job with poor pay." "The government should take some aggressive steps to save the centuries-old block-printing sector in south Punjab and Sindh," says the author. They should make it easier for those who work in this field. The sector is extremely profitable in India. "In Pakistan, the carving of wooden blocks has virtually ceased, the block-printing sector is diminishing, and people are closing down their businesses," says Allah Bux (Khan, 2021).

To get detailed insights in the craft we've interviewed native artisans from Kahrora Pakka. And further details about its practice and techniques are discussed in the light of these interviews.

"We are doing block printing since our childhood", say's Muhammad Akber Chughtai and Muhammad Husnain Chughtai. "Our Chughtai family is associated with this craft more than 200 years ago, since we are almost sixth generation who is associated with this craft. Our great grandfathers migrated from Turkey to India at the time of Mongol empire. After the defeat to Mughal empire in 1857, they shifted here in tehsil Kahrora Pakka from Jaipur with their art work. After partition in 1955, my grandfather Muhammad Hussain Chughtai visited Jaipur India again, and took some of his 100 years old blocks. He continued his artwork here, after him my father Abdul-haq Chughtai continued, and now I and my brother is doing this work."



Figure 1. A specimen of hand block printing from Chughtai family

They explained detailed process of the technique they are following from generations.

Block Making

The design has to be carved first on a block of wood and then printed on fabric. Block making was a long process. Indian rosewood commonly known as shesham or tali is used to make blocks. The stem should be cut in certain vertical direction, then it is carved with different designs. Each block is equipped with a wooden handle and has two to three cylindrical holes bored into it for unobstructed air flow and to let excess printing paste out. It took hours to carve it in minor details with tools like wood carving chisels, knives etc. After that, the block was dipped into mustard oil for a week, and then it gets ready for printing.



Figure 2. Some blocks owned by Chughtai family

Wood carving and block making is itself an art, which is also fading now. Only one person 75-year-old Shoukat Ali, is left in kahrorpakka who makes blocks. “There is no benefit in block making now. We have done this work generations after generations, but no one comes to help us. Not even government ever tried to approach us”, says Shoukat Ali (Figure 3).

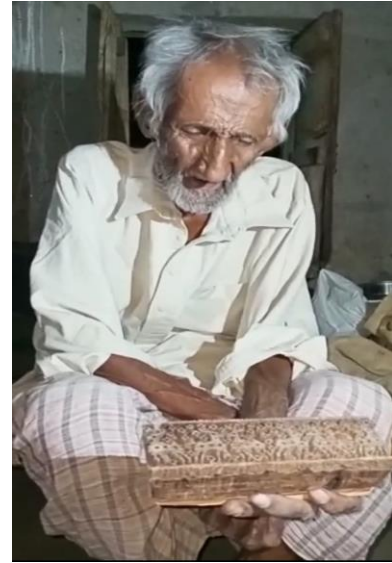


Figure 3. *Shoukat Ali (wood block carving artisan)*

Types of wooden blocks

There are two types of wooden blocks

- i. Outlining Block
- ii. Filling Block

One block is carved with the outline of the design while other has the filling carved structure. It gives amazing designs when dipped in color and pressed on cloth. As, a specimen shown in following figure (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Depiction of outlining and filling block and design*

Color Making

Muhammad Akber says that, in earlier times natural colors were used. Like Indigo was made with indigo plant, red from pomegranate peels, ochre from stem of mangeeth plant, and yellow from turmeric. But it was a long process which needs more time, cost and men power. Now, we use cost effective synthetic colors.

Preparing Color Tray

For color making, a dye paste is made for the color tray by combining the thickener, binder, and dye. The dye paste shouldn't be overly thick (which has the problem of not printing evenly) or watery (which has the disadvantage of spreading throughout the fabric). “Now a metal tray (Figure 5) is used. , in earlier times it was made up of Mud, wood pieces and female hairs. Female hairs were collected from neighborhood to make frames”, says Hasnain Chughtai.



Figure 5. *Metal try for color making*

The dye paste is now transferred from the bucket to the tray. Then, construct a net composed of bamboo sticks linked together with nylon thread in the shape of a square frame. The color's level should match the bamboo sticks square frame level on the color tray. If we want a design with less complexity, we keep georgette fabric above malmal cloth and on top of the jute fabric. If the block is more complex, malmal is kept above georgette fabric and jute fabric, respectively.

Printing Process

There are different blocks for design and color. Designs and motifs are influenced by regional sources, and they can be broadly divided into three categories: floral, figurative, and geometric.

Typically, 2-4 colours are used in each design. A separate block exists for each colour. Depending on the design, as many as 5-8 blocks may occasionally be used. However, block production and making costs increase correspondingly. Blocks are dipped into color and put on fabric with some force applied on its back (Figure 6), so that block leave the design marks on fabric. Some designs also include dying or vitrioling. Like design applied with indigo color is not visible unless the fabric is dipped into vitriol.



Figure 6. *Depiction of printing process*



Figure 7. *A colorful block print design*

SWOT Analysis of Hand Block Printing Craft in Pakistan

Strengths

- i. Have a cultural and traditional background
- ii. Used widely in the country in different regions
- iii. It provide livelihood to the people associated with it.
- iv. Pakistan is the hub for textile designs and this technique. Hence it has a large export potential.
- v. No use of modern machinery and electricity required, instead more labor is required.
- vi. A variety of required designs can be made according to requirement.
- vii. Chemical free natural dyes are also used.

Weaknesses

- i. Depends on human skill and labor hence chance of human error is more
- ii. Time consuming
- iii. Lack in business resources

Opportunities

- i. As, it is an older technique, this point can serve as a great opportunity in international market and contribute in increase of Pakistan's exports.
- ii. With collaboration of modern designers business can be increased.
- iii. To start a hand block printing unit is easy, as it does not require a large amount of investment.

Threats

- i. Modern world techniques and methods are more cheap, accurate and less time consuming. They are impacting the block printing market.
- ii. The proliferation of screen printing businesses that pass off their products, which frequently feature designs copied from block prints, as authentic block printed goods presents a growing danger to the block printing industry.

Challenges for Pakistani Block Printing Craft

Mass Production and Industrialization

Traditional handicrafts are being replaced by machine-made goods as a result of industrialization, and as a result of growing worldwide competition, handicrafts are facing competition from similar alternative goods. For example, screen printing is taking the place of hand block printing. In addition, the move to a modern way of life, diversity in production, distribution, and sales causes a decline in interest in the old business. "With automated units production increases as compared to cost, like an automated unit can make hundreds of bed sheets in a day, whereas an artisan can make maximum 3 bed sheets per day. Which increases time and cost" says Husnain Chughtai.

Lack of Innovation and Technological Advancement

This industry is regarded as a low technology sector since it uses conventional production and design techniques. A commercial product cannot be produced by the manufacturers because they lack the skills to design and develop new items, according to earlier studies. For sticking with the conventional patterns, the artisans must be criticized in part. Today's clients have a constantly changing demand for new designs; in order to compete in the market, artisans must comprehend the shifting wants of customers and provide contemporary designs while still maintaining the classic design motif. Because of a lack of creativity and technology, the artisans cannot satisfy customer needs.

The Difference Between Income and Needs

Many artisans come from low-income families, and as a result, they frequently encounter issues. Although many craftsmen could operate their stores successfully, due to financial limitations they are unable to grow their businesses and are unable to satisfy the demands of the market. Additionally, because local banks are unable to guarantee repayment, it is challenging for artists to obtain loans. Even if the artisans are successful in obtaining loans, their profit margin is insufficient to pay the interest rates.

"When downfall came to this block printing industry, due to the difference of need and income artisans doesn't pass on this skill to their children. Instead they opted for other fields to work to meet ends. Due to which number of artisans are also decreasing with the passage of time", says Husnain Chughtai.

Absence of Facilities for Education and Training

One of common hindrance to connect with the competitive modern world is the lack of formal education. One of the main causes of low education levels is that many items demand complicated, drawn-out processes that frequently involve the entire family, including kids, and cause them to drop out or miss school. One tough barrier to maintaining craft traditions is that artisans with poor levels of education find it difficult to take advantage of government programs, learn about the market, negotiate with middlemen

and dealers, and run their businesses effectively, rendering them uncompetitive. Additionally, there are very few vocational schools offering training in such skills.

Current Public Policies to Support the Art

Exhibitions are arranged on public and private level, where artisans are invited to showcase their art. Muhammad Husnain Chughtai discussed about these events in detail. It is each year in November or April government of Pakistan arrange an event at Lok Virsa Islamabad with the name of Lok Mela at national level. They have also arranged some events at international level. All kind of Handicraft artisans are invited from whole country. All the provinces Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, Khayber Pakhtunkhwa, Azad Kishmir and Gilgit Baltistan, had their dedicated pavilions. First time it was arranged in 1981. After that some people visited Kahrur Pakka from their and invited us. In 1987 my father and other fellow artisan participated there. From then till now 2022 we are participating each year. In Lok Virsa a workshop week is also arranged for college and university students. Another private event Daachi mela is organized in Lahore. It is a paid event but they invite artisans free of cost to showcase their work. On the other hand, there is Punjab Arts Council branches in every division including head office in Lahore. It works under government of Punjab. Whenever there an exhibition in any city of Punjab, they invite us. As, these exhibitions are organized in small cities and does not give that much good business therefore, government facilitate us in terms of residence other necessities. People from different NGOs (like Ahan and Sungi) also visit us oftentimes, set up workshops to learn this technique, and also guide our artisans about how can we grow our business. They also send us invites for their exhibitions. In these events we exhibit our process of live, along with selling our products. Sanatzar is an organization working under social welfare Pakistan. We have also worked with them in a number of workshops in different cities. Likewise, different universities call us for workshops. Additionally, students from different universities like University of The Punjab, National College of Arts Lahore, and other cities visit us here in Kahrur Pakka for research purposes and learn this art.

Some of the brands like Elan, Gultex and other small brands of Lahore, Islamabad, and Multan also approached us certain times for work. Some of them remained in contact with us for long time, along with work they also asked us for our artisans, to come to their setups and train their workers.

Suggestions to Encourage, Preserve and Strength Hand Block Printing

Collecting and Compiling Data

Data is a crucial component of policy formulation, but the handicraft industry has suffered from a lack of data; in developing countries, information on employment, income generation, and the export and import of various handicraft items is rarely available. One of the main obstacles to the development and promotion of craft traditions is certain nations. Absence of agreement on how to define handicrafts is one of the factors contributing to the absence of appropriate data.

When I started working on this paper it was hard to find authorized published material on history and industry of hand block printing in Pakistan. On the other hand, for Indian craft there is a lot of researched and published material on their history, not only on industry as whole but also on small fragments, like hand block printing craft of different regions, specialties of each region, statistics of business they are generating and how modern brands and designers are collaborating with them. Whereas, I got few lines in collective handicrafts research articles, that are also name to few. So, there is a need to do research collect statistics and publish it, so that world can know about our art also. It can also increase exports.

Value the Art and its Artist

Despite the importance of handicrafts in developing nations' societies, artisans have a poor social standing. They should be rewarded and shown admiration for their worthwhile practices in order to show that they are continuing the tradition and doing creative work. In addition to encouraging craftsmen to continue their work, it shows the community that their industry is being taken seriously.

The art and craft of our artist does not get due recognition. Artist does not get paid enough that they can manage their livelihood. The artists who are taking this craft as tradition from their ancestors and keeping it alive are asset of this country. They should get facilities and due recognition so that they don't thinking about leaving it.

Importance of Education and Training

Education and training are tools for increasing capacity, preserving, promoting, and passing down the know-how of traditional craft production from generation to generation. Thus, one of the most important policy concerns for the advancement of crafts is the provision of education and training to improve their capacity to "learn and compete". Therefore, it is crucial to teach the next generation the value of handicrafts. The craft has long been a part of the curriculum in several European nations.

The government should focus on launching courses and degree programs and bolstering handicrafts sector (Taylor et al., n.d.). This will not only support the industry's growth but also the preservation of cultural traditions' techniques and talents. The education of artisans is particularly important for obtaining the essential teaching abilities and methods to ensure that the inherited abilities and methods are passed on in their true letter and spirit to others.

The modern technologies offer innovative ways to preserve the priceless tradition and are very useful in valuing traditional culture. Despite the fact that it is challenging to digitize craft tradition information, some technologies are useful for its preservation. Today, complicated processes and abilities like surgery are already being taught using haptic devices and virtual reality. As these new technologies are highly helpful in transferring information to manual skills and related talents in addition to storing, coding, etc. [70] and it may be utilized as instructional tools, they are also very beneficial in digitally preserving the handcraft history. In order to promote and conserve this priceless cultural heritage, policymakers should also concentrate on implementing new technology in the education and training of the next generation.

Provision of Business to Artisans

One surefire way to empower craftspeople and create revenue and jobs is to give them access to credit facilities. Providing microfinance to artisans is necessary since it is one of the best ways to empower young people and create employment and income prospects. By offering simple and interest-free lending options, financial institutions may support cultural heritage and aid artisans in growing their businesses.

Another way to raise money is through crowd funding, which may also be used to plan a craft fair where artisans can display their artistic creations in hopes of gaining support from the public. There are numerous instances where people have persuaded a sizable portion of the public to invest less money in their initiatives or novel items.

Conclusion

Hand block printing is a traditional craft of Pakistan which is fading due to lack of finances and recognition. There is a need to take measures on larger scale to boost this industry because it has the potential to give huge benefit to country in terms of export. Additionally, it is a part of our culture and dwells in traditions from centuries so we need to take measures to preserve our identity. On the basis of the interviews conducted from native artisans it can be observed that there is a need to invest in this tremendous traditional craft in terms of research, education, training, business, and recognition so that it can flourish.

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Conflict of Interest


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