

Sandhani

Weaving Transformations in Kachchh, India
Key Findings and Analysis

સંઘણી

કચ્છી હાથવણાટની ઉદ્યમી ક્ષિતિજો



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Kalpavriksh and Khamir
with the Vankars of Kachchh

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Summary



This is a study of the multiple dimensions of transformation taking place in the livelihoods of the *vankar* (weaver) community of Kachchh, Gujarat, India, linked to an overall revival of the handloom weaving (*vanaat*) craft from a time when it was in sharp decline. Using an analytical tool called the Alternatives Transformation Format, the study assessed, using participatory processes and methods, changes taking place in economic, social, cultural, political and ecological spheres of a community's life. It looked at whether such changes can be said to be in the direction of alternative transformation, i.e. systemic or structural change towards justice and sustainability.

The study is a collaboration amongst three partners: Kalpavriksh, Khamir¹, and the community of *vankars* as represented by some of its senior members. For Kalpavriksh, it is one of several case studies that have been conducted within the global project 'Academic-Activist Co-generation of Knowledge on Environmental Justice' (www.acknowledgej.org). Khamir joined the process as local craft organisation doing intensive work with Kachchh's weavers, wishing to understand the transformation taking place, to get a reflection on it's own work. The *vankars* were keen on documentation of the history of transformation, especially as a means of dialogue between generations.

This report highlights four positive features of the transformation in weaving and in related aspects of the lives of the *vankar* community, as found in the study:

- i. an overall increase in well-being, especially economic, and a continued sense of identity and belongingness in relation to the craft
- ii. the retention or return of youth to *vanaat*, with a mix of economic, socio-cultural, psychological incentives
- iii. linked transformations in social relationships, including in caste (a reduction in casteism towards a community traditionally considered at the bottom of the hierarchy), gender (a greater role and voice for women), and generations (a greater assertiveness amongst youth while retaining traditional respect for elders)

1. This study was coordinated by Ashish Kothari on behalf of Kalpavriksh and Durga Venkataswamy on behalf of Khamir, and involved in its core team Juhi Pandey and Ghatit Laheru of Khamir, Radhika Mulay, Kankana Trivedi and Arpita Lulla of Kalpavriksh, external consultants Meera Goradia and Arun Mani Dixit, and senior weavers Shamji Vishram Siju, Meghji Harji Vankar, Murji Hamir Vankar, Ramji Maheshwari, and Naran Madan Siju. Suraj Jacob as a member of the India advisory team for the ACKnowl-EJ project, provided valuable comments and inputs. Comments were also provided by several members of the project from within and outside India.

- iv. a flowering of innovation and creativity, and hybrid knowledge and learning systems, without losing the essence of Kachchh's vanaat.

The study points out, however, that transformations, being complex social phenomena, are not necessarily internally harmonious. Three key issues are focused on:

- v. increasing and increasingly visible economic inequality, between two broad 'classes' of weavers (entrepreneurs and job workers), and amongst geographically spread out settlements with those close to Bhuj (the district capital) and main markets being able to avail of the transformative factors more than others
- vi. increasing ecological footprint due to a shift from predominantly local exchange of raw materials and finished products, to a more national and globalised exchange, though a rise in the use of locally grown organic cotton (kala) offsets this somewhat
- vii. a near-absence of collective mobilisation relating to livelihoods amongst the *vankars*, though there are some very recent initiatives that are promising.

The study also explored key factors in bringing about such transformations, including:

- viii. the role of agency, such as the adaptability, resilience, and innovativeness of the weavers themselves, the facilitation of institutions enabling innovations in production and marketing, and others
- ix. the key circumstances (in economy and society) that contribute directly or indirectly, such as new consumer tastes and markets, new techniques and technologies, and in this case a massive earthquake that was a crisis turned into an opportunity.

The study briefly looks at how robust or fragile the transformation towards well-being is, and finally brings out some key lessons for transformations towards justice and sustainability.

As a specific sub-focus in the study, a detailed 'ecological footprint assessment' was attempted based on a small sample of weavers, comparing the impacts of the organic kala cotton and of the genetically modified (Bt) cotton. This found a clearly smaller impact of the former.



Introduction



This is a study of the multiple dimensions of transformation taking place in the livelihoods of the *vankar* (weaver) community of Kachchh, Gujarat, India, as part of and resulting from an overall revival of the handloom weaving (*vanaat*) craft from a time when it was in sharp decline. It has examined whether the changes taking place can be said to be in the direction of alternative transformation, i.e. systemic or structural change towards justice and sustainability. It looks at how well-being has increased, along with positive transformations in caste, gender, and generational relationships, but also how on issues of class and ecological sustainability there have been some regressive trends. It analyses some key lessons regarding transformation towards justice and sustainability, and issues with regard to current and future sustainability (economic, social, ecological) of weaving.

For Kalpavriksh, this is one of several case studies that have been conducted within the global project 'Academic-Activist Co-generation of Knowledge on Environmental Justice' (www.acknowledgej.org). Khamir joined the process as a local craft organisation doing intensive work with Kachchh's weavers.

There were several motivations and objectives involved in choosing this study:

- i. The initial interest of Khamir (www.khamir.org), a craft facilitation organisation that has had a significant role in the revival of *vanaat* in Kachchh, to understand the ecological footprint of the craft; an assessment of this kind could be used as a means of testing the claim that handloom weaving is eco-friendly (especially in comparison to powerloom and industrial production of cloth), and/or consider interventions if aspects of it are found not to be ecologically sensitive. Khamir's interest later expanded to understand the holistic transformations that have taken place in the sector, from social, economic, cultural, environmental and political prisms. It also wished to use this understanding to get a reflection on its own work.
- ii. Kalpavriksh's interest in using the Alternatives Transformation Format² (ATF) to study not only the ecological dimension but also other dimensions of transformation; this format was developed as part of ACKnowl-EJ but emerged from an older process of documenting and networking alternative initiatives across India called Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence, see www.vikalpsangam.org).
- iii. An interest amongst the weaver community, as expressed by some of its elders, for

2. http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives_transformation_framework_revised_20.2.2017.pdf

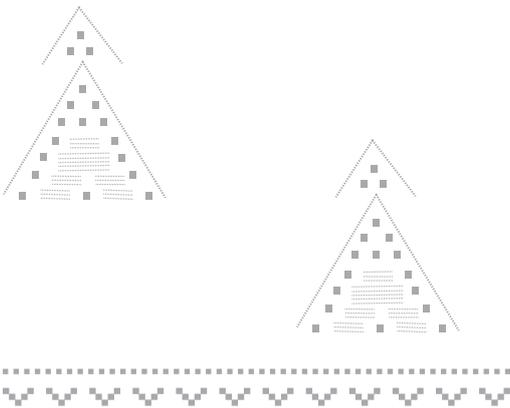
documentation of its history and changes in the last few decades, to help transmit this to new generations.

- iv. The possibility of using the study's results to generate further discussions amongst all the partners, on interventions of benefit to the *vankars* as also to the environment.
- v. An interest in Khamir and the consultants involved, in seeing if such a study could become an example for or provide key lessons for similar multi-dimensional studies of handloom sector in other parts of India, or even studies of other craft sectors.



One of the village meetings with the *vankars* of Jamthada village along with members from Khamir, Kalpavriksh and *vankars* from the core team.

Methodology

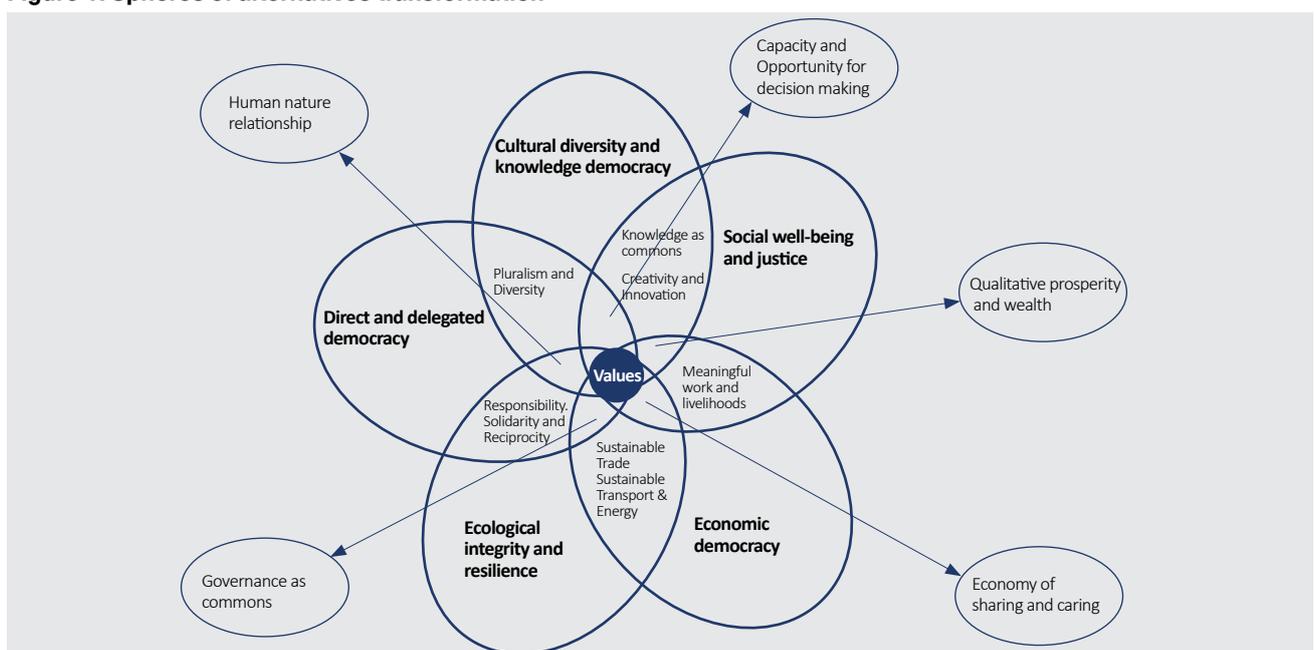


The study has involved three main actors: Kalpavriksh, Khamir, and the Vankar community. A number of consultants or advisers have been part of the study, including experts in Indian crafts, an ecologist, and an economist.

2.1 Conceptual framework

The study is based primarily on the use of the Alternatives Transformation Format (ATF). The ATF is designed to assess transformations taking place along five spheres (economic, political, social, cultural, ecological; see Figure 1) in any initiative of change. As it notes: “across the world there are initiatives by communities, civil society organisations, government agencies, and businesses to tackle the challenges of unsustainability, inequity, and injustice. Many of them confront the basic structural reasons for these challenges, such as capitalism, patriarchy, state-centrism, or other inequities in power resulting from caste, ethnic, racial, and other social characteristics; we call these transformative or radical alternatives.” The ATF helps to get an understanding of whether changes are taking place towards alternative transformations, i.e. greater direct or radical democracy (where people on the

Figure 1: Spheres of alternatives transformation



(Note: the topics mentioned in the overlapping areas are only indicative, not exhaustive)

ground are core part of decision-making), more control over the economy by the public (not the state or corporations) and the revival of relations of caring and sharing, sustaining or reviving cultural and knowledge diversity and the commons, and greater equality and justice on gender, class, caste, ethnic, 'race', and other aspects, all of this on a base of ecological resilience and sustainability and on fundamental ethics of co-existence amongst humans and between humans and nature.

This is the first-ever study in India to look at a craft from multiple dimensions (economic, socio-cultural, political, ecological, ethical), and the first in the world to use the ATF. It was considered to be a good candidate because, *prima facie*, there appeared to be many dimensions to the transformation taking place in the lives of *vankars*, and different study partners were interested in different dimensions but also in seeing how it all looks as one picture.

2.2 Methods and processes used

In the first few months of the study, the core study team discussed the ATF within itself and with the core team of weavers. Realising that it would not be possible to use it comprehensively given time and resource constraints, the team narrowed down the elements for study to about a dozen, based on preliminary visits to some villages and the early observations of what seemed to be important. The shortlisted elements were discussed again with the core team of weavers, at which stage some changes were made (e.g. some cultural aspects the study team wanted to look into, were dropped as they were considered too sensitive and potentially misleading by the *vankars*). The ATF was never used as a questionnaire or format in the visits to the villages or focused group discussions; rather, the key elements were introduced in the form of issues such as the relationships of *vankars* within themselves, and between them and other communities, the State, nature, and the market, and the historical changes that have taken place in the community and its craft.

Briefly, the methods used for the study included:

1. Choosing, keeping in mind time and resource constraints, a sample of 15 villages³ with about 600 weavers (out of a total of 62 villages, with about 1000 weavers) for study, based on a *prima facie* understanding of where transformation has taken place as a result of Khamir's work and/or other interventions (even as an associated study and a database survey during the process would get a broad understanding of the entire *vankar* community as a context)⁴
2. Selecting a team of senior *vankars* to involve in the study, as also periodically bounce off ideas and results;
3. Involving in a part of the study, a group of *vankar* women from one particular village where they are organised into a loosely knit weaving group;
4. Involving, in video documentation and as part of discussions, a group of youth from amongst the *vankars*;
5. One or more visits to each of the 15 villages, for group discussions, one-to-one interactions, and observations, mostly amongst *vankars*, and a very small number of other communities (Ahirs, Rabaris);

3. These are: Bhujodi, Awadh Nagar, Kotay, Jamthada, Faradi, Siracha, Rampar Vekra, Godhra, Adhoi, Sanganara, Mathal, Mota Varnora, Ghanithar, Sarali, Ningal

4. Unless otherwise specified or clearly contextualised, wherever this report refers to *vankars*, it is about weavers from these 15 villages.



Map of Kachchh with the sample of 15 villages selected for the study highlighted

6. Visits to other sites for the Ecological Footprint Assessment (EFA), including farmers growing Kala cotton, traders, spinning and ginning mills, and dye units (see below, more on the EFA methods).
7. Focused group discussions with women, youth, and elders in Khamir or other locations;
8. Perusal of secondary literature available with Khamir, and with Kachchh Mahila Vikas Sangathan (a group working for women's empowerment across Kachchh);
9. Discussions with some key people involved in interventions or studies with *vankars* in the last 3 decades;
10. Discussion on key results with *vankars*, including the various teams mentioned above, and separately with women, with youth, and in clusters of villages;
11. Conducting a baseline survey of weaver families across Kachchh.

The Ecological Footprint Assessment (EFA) used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies in an attempt to get a broad understanding of the craft's impact, as also develop a template that could possibly be used for handlooms elsewhere, and with modifications for other crafts. The EFA has not been attempted for the entire handloom sector in Kachchh, but rather for that part which uses cotton, and here the main objective is to calculate and compare the ecological handprint of different types of cotton (Kala and Bt are used in Kachchh). The tools for data collection were case studies along the cotton value chain, interviews of key informants using a closed ended questionnaire, and for calculations, the Cool Farm Toolkit (<https://app.coolfarmtool.org/>)

Additionally, participatory video documentation was carried out with a group of youth from amongst the *vankars*, to be made into 6 short films on various aspects of the transformation.

2.3 Limitations

The study has several limitations. One or them, more a part of the design than a 'limitation' (as in a weakness) per se, is that our access to *vankars* was determined primarily by villages where Khamir had a presence or contacts, where prima facie transformation was going on, though this does not mean that we went only or predominantly to *vankars* who actually work with Khamir. As mentioned

above, it was not possible to cover all the 62 villages; but we do have a broad picture of what is happening in the villages other than the 15 studied more intensively, based on the larger-scale surveys that have been carried out simultaneously including visits to these 62 villages undertaken by Khamir's team along with core group of *vankars*, and a database developed using a mobile app and manual methods for all the weaver families of Kachchh. Certain aspects like the inter- and intra-community political dynamics could not be studied in any depth, and some cultural aspects that had initially been included for study were left out on the request of the community. The core team of weavers involved with the study from the start, consisted only of male, weaver entrepreneurs who Khamir was familiar with (though later on women and youth also were involved in some aspects). Language was occasionally a limiting factor when the community interaction teams did not have Kachchhi or Gujarati speaking people. We would have liked to do more interactions with non-vankar communities than we managed, to get a better understanding of the changes in relations between them and the *vankars*, and their perceptions of the transformation in the *vankars'* lives. Time was also limited given the short time window of a year, especially because, with the exception of one member of the team, all others were part time. It was also a limitation that the full time team member did not know the local language, and had first time exposure to the region and the craft.



Weavers of *Kharad*, a type of carpet woven with wool which is dyed in vegetable colours. To the left is master weaver Samat Tejshibhai Marwada from Sanjotnagar, explaining the design on one of the *Kharad* carpet woven by him.



Transformations: findings of the study



The Kachchh landscape with camel herd and herders

3.1 Background

This study is located in the district of Kachchh, in the western Indian state of Gujarat. Kachchh is extremely dry, and ecologically distinct from the rest of India due to the extensive grassland and salt desert ecosystems that cover most of its area. It has had a long history of nomadic and settled pastoralism, and other livelihoods based on its unique ecological features. Traditionally these livelihoods were also associated with the religious and caste identities, though this is now becoming less distinctly so especially where urban and industrial economies have come up.

Vankars, part of the Marwada (and in very small numbers, the Maheshwari and Gurjar) subgroups of the Meghwal community that originally came from neighbouring Rajasthan, are spread over much of the district (see below, brief timeline). Traditionally, they have also been involved both in weaving and in other occupations including farming, leatherwork, and labour. Of late many of them have become full-time weavers, and the widespread use of the identity 'vankar' to refer to themselves as a community is only 2-3 decades old.



Vankar working on a loom

The 'conflict'⁵ that forms the focus of this study relates to the economic and social distress and discrimination that *vankars* as a whole were facing, particularly in the early years of the 21st century. A series of changes in the larger economic and social milieu that Kachchh was part of, including the rise of industrial cloth production flooding the market with cheap products (e.g., shawls made on powerlooms in Ludhiana, imitating Kachchhi designs), alterations in habits and tastes amongst communities that *vankars* made cloth for (and their inability to buy the more expensive newer products), reduction in availability of traditional yarns (especially sheep wool), and the intervention of government and civil society agencies that attempted to link weaving with external markets, were already changing the nature of how (and for what) *vankars* were using their craft in the last couple of decades of the 20th century. A devastating earthquake in 2001 caused severe loss of productive capacity (literally, damaging looms across hundreds of households) as also markets. At the same time, newer job opportunities arose, for instance in industries being set up by the government or private sector, or as labour in the middle East. On its own, already somewhat on the economic margins of society, as also because of their marginalisation as dalits (the so-called 'outcastes' of Hindu society)⁶, the *vankar* community found it hard to recover.

5. We are here using a broad definition of the term 'conflict' to refer not only to particular cases of projects and processes that threaten survival and livelihoods (as predominantly used in the ACKnowl-EJ project emanating from the EJ Atlas, www.ejatl.org), but also to background structural processes of impoverishment, discrimination, oppression, and marginalization.

6. Dalits, numbering about 300 million and with significant internal diversity, have historically been amongst India's most oppressed and marginalized people. Dominant Hindu caste society holds them to be the most 'impure' of people within the Hindu fold, so much so that they are not even one of the four varnas or main castes (hence 'outcaste'), and are considered 'untouchable' because any touch or even hints of touch could cause 'impurity' to other castes. Traditional occupations, considered the dirtiest or most impure, included skinning dead animals and leather work, manual scavenging including of human waste, sweeping and drain cleaning, etc. Significant affirmative state action including 'reservations' to jobs and educational institutions, social campaigns by government and civil society agencies, religious conversions to escape the shackles of Hindu casteism, and strident mobilization by Dalits themselves, has helped many Dalits to move out of their traditional condition, and significantly reduce aspects like untouchability. But for a majority, visible and invisible vestiges of marginalization and oppression continue. *Vankars* in Kachchh do not necessarily call themselves Dalit; several elders told us they feel this is denotes 'downtrodden', and they prefer being called Meghwal or *vankar*.

A number of factors began to turn the tide from about 2005-06. This included the intervention of Khamir, set up with the mandate of helping in revival and sustenance of Kachch's crafts, to try to re-establish relevant economic value chains. This was done in particular through the revival of production based on the indigenous (and organically cultivated) Kala cotton.



Indigenous and organically cultivated Kala cotton

It also included a renewed consumer interest in handwoven cloth and marketing opportunities in the Kachchh desert festival, exhibitions and markets in India's big cities and in Europe, interventions by handloom and design schools (Kalaraksha Vidhyalaya and Somiayya Kala Vidhyalaya in Kachchh & the Handloom School at Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh) to help train young weavers in entrepreneurship or design innovation, the distribution of looms and other help by the government immediately after the earthquake (said by *vankars* to be a relatively minor factor), and other such factors. Handloom weaving has revived in a significant way in the last decade or so, transforming the lives of at least a part of the *vankar* community.

Amongst the fundamental structural aspects that lay at the base of the conflict situation described above, are an economic system that has marginalised *vankars* (including their skills, knowledge, and products) as producers, and a social system (casteism) that has for long relegated them to the bottom-most position on the ladder of status. Within the *vankars* too, there are structural issues like patriarchy and masculinity that marginalise women, and generational inequities with youth having little say in community matters. There is finally the issue of the distance between weaving and nature. It was perhaps never a very strong direct relationship (as for instance would have been the case for pastoralists), but many decades back when wool from local sheep and camels, dependent on local ecosystems, was the main yarn, and there was some amount of use of natural dyes from local plants, the relationship is likely to have been stronger.



Pastoralist Maldharis with whom vankars shared a relationship of interdependence for livelihood

3.2 Brief history

The study has formulated, based on available records and discussions with senior *vankars*, a timeline of change and transformation amongst the *vankars*, with the following key periods or events:

500- 600 years ago: the Meghwal community of Rajasthan migrated to Kachchh. The *vankars* in Kutch are mostly Marwadadas (and some Maheshwaris and Gurjars) from the Meghwal community, a traditionally oppressed community treated as 'untouchables' in the past. These landless Marwadadas lived with the local pastoral Rabari community and other communities such as Ahirs, Darbars and Patels, with hereditary relations of economic exchange amongst them (Ksing and Singh, no date).

19th century till after independence: This was a period when weavers were most affected by introduction of cheap mill made textiles. Hand spun yarn and employment opportunities experienced a decline, leading to impoverishment. Interdependence amongst the communities mentioned above diminished as the country 'modernised'. With the weakening local market, weavers were forced to service more urban customers and began experimenting with different raw materials and techniques.

1935-onwards: Introduction of Khadi (already advocated by Mahatma Gandhi on a visit in 1925); this was also an era of co-operatives or *Vankar Mandalis*, aimed at safeguarding the economic, social and cultural interests of this community. The first Khadi organisation Charkha Madhi, started in Gadshisha around 1940.

1947: Around 5000-5500 weavers came together as part of a Weavers Sammelan organised in presence of Shri Ravishankar Maharaj, an eminent Gandhian. The issues related to weavers particularly shortage of yarn were discussed.

1959: Introduction of the fly shuttle created scope for weaving fabric of wider width leading to increased production.

Pre & post-1960: Earlier, Marwada and Maheshwari weavers wove for local communities. In 1960s, most Maheshwari families moved to other professions and villages. Kandla SEZ, a significant infrastructural facility, was set up.

1961-62: The practise of blending yarn began when softer merino wool of finer counts was introduced. It was introduced through Rajasthan Khadi board, which was importing merino wool at that time. It led to changes in weaving technique, which was earlier handling only coarse wool.

1965: An inroad into an urban market was made by the Sohan Sahakari Mandli. Prabhaben Shah of Sohan Sahakari Mandli introduced new product and design ideas to the weavers. Shawls that were more suitable to urban markets were developed from the traditional dhabda.

1970s: Weavers in Kutch began getting recognition for their skills through national awards.

1975 onwards: The Gujarat State Handicrafts and Handloom Development Corporation (GSH&HDC) commonly known as 'the Nigam' or 'Garvi Gurjari', offered state support to weavers, which boosted the craft production in villages.

1976: Acrylic, a synthetic industrial yarn was found by Haja Suja Vankar in Delhi market. It offered a large range of pre-dyed colours to choose from and was cheaper. It quickly spread, and made Kachchh shawls popular. Since then, acrylic yarn use rose considerably in Kachchh and the rest of India.

1980s: Meghwals who were earlier part-time weavers started practising weaving full time, making it a viable livelihood for many, with diversification into new products for external markets using mostly merino wool and acrylic, with a small portion using cotton (for bedcovers and home linen). Local (desi) cotton and desi wool lost favour due to less demand and price.

1991-92: There was a good volume of orders for shawls from Garvi Gurjari. Economic liberalisation policies were put into place, with diverse impacts on crafts. There was a spike in exports due to the economic liberalization; acrylic yarn shawls were exported mostly to the Middle East where they were converted into garments.

1995: Rayon was used marginally in shawl designs but replaced silk in mashru weaving, a smaller segment in Kutch weaving.

1990's: Ludhiana powerloom units began to produce imitations of the Kachchh shawl in acrylic yarn, and sold these for far cheaper than the handloom ones, both in local and distant markets.

Early 2000s: Weaving activity concentrated in villages like Bhujodi and Sarali. Sarali was more focused on wholesale and export while Bhujodi being close to Bhuj catered more to a tourist and retail market.

2001: A massive earthquake devastated Kachchh; weavers suffered severe decline in the craft due to loss of loom, house, or other facilities; several weavers left to work in newly established industries.

2005: Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya (KRV), a design institute for rural artisans, was established.

2007-onwards: Khamir organised exhibitions telling the weavers' story, with the support of Dastkar, Delhi, which over 3 years brought a cross section of weavers together, focused on design and product diversity. These exhibitions created a buzz, brought in more buyers and expanded the weaver base for institutions like Fabindia.

Khamir initiated Kala cotton (indigenous variety, rainfed) value chain, from cultivation to fabric production, which later caught on the public imagination and became the centre of handloom revival. Upcycling of plastic waste for weaving was taken up, centered around rural livelihood for women.

2009: In order to reduce impact of Ludhiana powerloom shawls that reproduced Kachchhi motifs and to protect their identity, *vankars* with Khamir's support promoted Kutch Weavers Association (KWA) to apply for Geographical Indication mark for the Kachchh shawl.

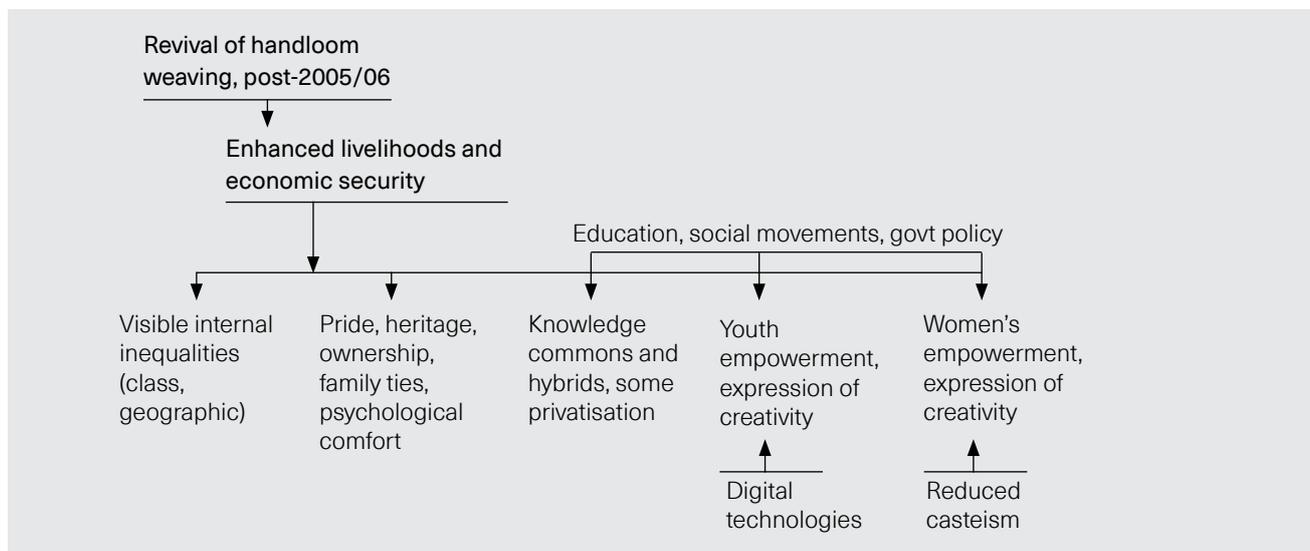
2014: Somaiya Kala Vidya (SKV), another design school for craftspersons was established, continuing the same curriculum of KRV. Courses include business and management studies.

Present situation: Handloom weaving is thriving in some villages. Change in market profiles, national & international exhibitions, national and foreign tourism, fashion designers, and social media have increased demand, bringing in robustness in the sector. New community based relationships have developed in order to cater to the external markets, including direct contact & / or creative collaborations. There is a higher degree of entrepreneurship. Earlier in 2000, there were only 10-12 entrepreneurs that invested in production and accessed local & distant markets; currently there are over 50. Preliminary results of the comprehensive data survey mentioned above, indicate nearly one thousand active weavers in 62 villages; in the 15 covered in this study, there are a little under 600.

3.3 Transformations in different dimensions

The revival of vanaat has had ramifications in various spheres of the life of *vankars*. A simple overview of the transformations taking place is given in Figure 2; each of these is explained in the sections below.

Figure 2: Multi-dimensional transformations in lives of vankars as a result of revival of vanaat (the arrows represent direction of influence)



3.1.1 Economic sphere

The revival of an economic livelihood that was in severe decline in the early part of this century, and consequent livelihood security for a part of the vankar community, is the most obvious aspect of transformation. It is important to note that this revival builds on local traditional knowledge and locally (family) owned means of production. This is in contrast to the situation of other communities whose traditional occupations and livelihoods have declined, in Kachchh or elsewhere in India. Millions of farmers, fishers, craftspersons, forest-dwellers, and others dependent on the 'primary' sector have been 'deskilled' through loss of productive natural resources (including land) or outright displacement, and have had to switch to insecure, lowly-paid and alienating jobs in entirely new activity like large-scale industry, construction, services or other parts of 'modern' economy, where their own knowledge is considered useless, and where the means of production are wholly or predominantly owned by others (state or private).⁷

The revival of handloom weaving has been accompanied by an increase in incomes for at least a part of the Vankar community, as quite visibly seen in the changes in lifestyles, housing, and other indicators.⁸ Several entrepreneur weavers (those who are able to sell their own products) have much

7. Shrivastava and Kothari (2012); Sadgopal (2016); Basole (2018); Sundar (2018).

8. The full study will have some key statistics on earnings etc.

greater access to outside markets in India's metropolitan cities and in European countries, directly on their own or through intermediaries.

Even in the case of several weavers who are not entrepreneurs, but do 'job work' for the entrepreneur weavers, there has been an increase in earnings. This is partly due to the overall increase in market opportunities for the sector, and partly due to the deliberate action of Khamir to provide higher wages for the weavers working for them, forcing the entrepreneurs also to enhance wages.

The overall uplift in handloom weaving in a number of villages of Kachchh has resulted also in arrested or reverse occupational migration, with several young people staying on or coming back to it. This is in contrast to a general trend of new generations leaving traditional occupations across India, and though by no means a dominant process even amongst the Kachchh weavers, it shows the potential of such livelihoods to generate interest in the youth. For this and other reasons, this also becomes an important alternative to the narrative, being pushed by government and corporations, that large-scale industrialisation is the only pathway to economic prosperity and job creation in Kachchh (and elsewhere). The search for such alternatives is urgent given that industrialisation is already leading to serious ecological and social disruption in the region.



Young weavers are keen on understanding transformations in their livelihoods through the case study discussions, Adhoi

Another crucial aspect of this revival is that handloom weaving, while critically reliant on the existence of a market (local or national/global), is not a purely commercial activity, but seen also as a phenomenon with social, cultural, emotional, intellectual significance. We come back to this later.

There has been a strong tradition of patronage in the community, i.e. a patron who protects and ensures security for the weaker members of the community. This mindset has dovetailed into the master craftsperson system, where the weaver entrepreneur controls raw material, design and marketing while the weavers weave for wages. While this was very much the case till the early 2000s, the economic shifts that have happened since, have now resulted in far more complexity. Earlier there were four main kinds of people into vanaat, most of them part-time since vanaat was not the only occupation:

- a. The master artisan⁹ supplying to both local and external markets
- b. The entrepreneur with limited capacity supplying to mainly local markets and master artisans.
- c. The job worker weaver.
- d. The pre-loom preparatory workers, mostly women.

Now there is a more complex set, with both entrepreneurs and job workers being divided into part-time and full-time, semi-skilled and skilled; entrepreneurs using acrylic only and those using Kala sometimes mixed with other materials; weavers who are mainly supplying to external markets and others who continue to feed a (declining) local market: and amongst these a new set of young weavers and women some of whom have their own market connections.

The vankar community with the facilitation of Khamir also seems to have some control over defining the market, rather than purely responding to it. For instance, a market has actually been created for Kala cotton cloth and clothes (somewhat similar to the market that has been created for organic



Saris woven by *vankars* using Kachchhi motifs and patterns, Kotay



Diverse range of handloom products including stoles and scarves woven by *vankars* for external markets

9. A term that appears to have come in with the advent of external markets and government awards to craftspersons, and has likely created its own power dynamics within the vankars (an aspect not studied here).

food in many parts of India, or globally). Entrepreneurs in Bhujodi, the most thriving of the vankar settlements, have created a demand for the 'Bhujodi sari' When the demand for dupattas decreased, *vankars* came up with products like stoles and scarves. The first stoles were designed by designers who came in during the earthquake as part of the rehabilitation efforts, brought in by various aid agencies and government organizations. Costing of such products is also to some extent in the hands of the producers or intermediaries like Khamir, with producers expressing satisfaction at the prices they get (very unlike, for instance, what farmers get for their produce in most parts of India where they are not organised into cooperatives or companies, or have not got into niche markets like organic food).

This does not necessarily change the fact that the revival is dependent primarily on external (including foreign) markets¹⁰, with its own issues of vulnerability¹¹, absence of (or only weak) challenge to macro-economic and class inequalities both locally and in larger society, absence of a challenge to capitalism as a system, and (as described below), some negative ecological ramifications.

Another crucial issue is that over the last few decades, weaving has been transformed from being primarily confined to local economic exchange to more global ones. For instance, raw material like wool used to come from local pastoralists, and cloth woven by *vankars* was given back to them; there were other similar localised processes. A major change occurred when acrylic produced outside the region was introduced as a yarn in the 1970s, enabling an expansion of weaving as it was easier to use, but with the produce being sold both locally and outside the region. Currently the situation is mixed; while Kala cotton is locally produced, establishing or re-establishing a link with local farming communities, the sale of cloth made from it is primarily outside. Additionally it is a more difficult yarn to work with, and try variations on, than acrylic, and only entrepreneurs with some working capital or holding capacity can afford to stock it in bulk, thus disprivileging the job worker or the small entrepreneur. Overall, the economic links with other local communities such as the pastoral Rabaris, farming or business-based Ahirs/Patels and others, have declined considerably. They have not completely stopped, for in some communities (especially far from Bhuj as the urban and marketing centre, such as Ghanithar village) the traditional relationship continues in some form.

What has significantly increased is the link to rich consumers in Indian metropolises and in foreign countries; this means that the local revival is based on elite consumers, an irony that cannot be ignored. The silver lining to this is that it is catering to that section of the global market that has at least some level of concern for ecological, health, and social issues, assuming that they are buying these products with the environment, the producer, and their own and others' health in mind.¹²

The downside of increased prosperity in the community is what appears *prima facie* to be an increase in economic inequality amongst the *vankars* themselves. We do not have the baseline data for earlier periods to show this conclusively, but senior *vankars* agree that inequality has increased, at least compared to 4-5 decades back when most *vankars* were on similar levels of earning. This is especially so between the entrepreneur weavers (especially those who have managed to significantly enlarge their market base and even employ a lot of workers) and the job workers. The study noticed some rather glaring discrepancies in the living conditions of the two, in some villages, though it also came across several job workers who expressed significantly better conditions now than before. Amongst at least some of the job workers, there is also a sense of alienation, with weaving being seen as just physical labour (*majuri*) like any other, and for these the notion of alienated labour does seem to be appropriate.

10. Especially in the case of kala cotton products; there is still a substantial local market in acrylic products.

11. History is riddled with examples (vanilla, coffee, quinoa, and many many more) of the vulnerability of people dependent on external markets which they have no control or even influence over.

12. The study was not able to get views of the global buyer or trader on this aspect, though.

Another noticeable phenomenon is the geographic inequality within the Vankar community. Villages close to the district capital Bhuj, and/or where institutions like Khamir have been active, are clearly doing much better than others. The general surveys referred to above (beyond the 15 villages chosen for focused study) strongly indicate that distress continues amongst *vankars* of villages which do not have these advantages. In discussion with vankar elders, there appeared to be clear recognition of these inequities; one suggestion that came up was that entrepreneurs should focus more on giving Kala cotton and other work to weavers in such 'remote' areas, and also enable greater innovation/diversity in acrylic, to reduce at least some geographical inequities. They also pointed to the fact that settlements like Bhujodi had a greater critical mass of *vankars*, who were able to stand up to caste oppression and economic marginalisation more than in villages where vankar families are a tiny minority.

Interestingly, while on social matters there is reported to be a high level of cohesion and inter-personal or intra-community support (e.g. donations or loans for weddings or other functions if someone cannot afford them), this does not translate into the economic domain. Little thought has gone into the economically better-off *vankars* helping the badly-off ones, though there have been occasional discussions (including some as part of this study). Yet we did not come across strong resentment or sense of conflict due to the inequality. Senior *vankars* who were in the core study team mentioned the following factors behind this: economic inequalities are still not large enough to be perceived of as being exploitative, and there is no feeling that some weavers have deliberately created conditions for such inequalities; in some cases there is lack of pro-activeness to improve one's situation, or weaving capabilities are low, which is recognised; mutual aid (for social issues) and relations of care still work; and finally there remains a strong sense of social equality and common religious or spiritual identity between those who are economically unequal.

It is also interesting that most *vankars*, especially the job workers, do not wear the products they are weaving, especially if it is Kala cotton, as they can't afford it! Some of the entrepreneurs have made it a point to wear Kala, and there is discussion on how this needs to be increased amongst others (especially the youth), perhaps by enabling some extra yardage to be retained by weavers rather than have to sell off everything.

3.1.2 Socio-cultural sphere

Indian society in general has been characterised by moderate to severe inequities within and between communities. These relate to casteism (prevalent especially in Hindu society but also communities practising other major religions, and much less prevalent in adivasis or indigenous/tribal peoples), patriarchy and masculinity (almost universal, though again less pronounced in adivasis), ethnicities (between adivasis and non-adivasis, or different religious groups), 'ability' (differently abled people being discriminated against), age (the domination of elders going beyond justified respect to a serious lack of space for the young to express themselves), and others. The study attempted to understand if and how transformations may have taken place in some of these aspects.

Caste: There is a clear and consistent reporting of reduction in casteism, especially its worst forms of untouchability, which *vankars* were traditionally subjected to. Several elder *vankars* talked about various practices of social stigma they were subjected to, such as not being allowed to enter the houses of other castes that they had economic relations with, or their cloth not being accepted without sprinkling water on it to rid it of its 'impurity'. The worst forms of casteism such as these practices associated with untouchability are reported to be well on their way out, and relations with other communities is increasingly seen on a more equal footing, especially amongst the youth. But by no means is casteism eradicated; several *vankars* mentioned continued discrimination of various kinds, including restrictions on entry to some temples, or subtler kinds such as furtively keeping cups or glasses separately for use by *vankars* in some shops. It appears that where it has reduced, in form and intensity, it is at least partly due to the enhanced economic status of *vankars*; several *vankars* said



Bhajans have been integral part of the culture of vankar community, including those that use analogies of weaving in explaining the philosophy of life. This mandali is from Bhujodi.

their greater wealth status, their contacts with outside world, greater confidence levels, and other such aspects associated with the revival in vanaat, were important factors. But many also talked about social reformers, education and law, and declining economic relations with other communities, as being other key factors, with the new generation being much less steeped in casteist traditions. The relative role of such 'background' factors or circumstances compared to that of transformation in vanaat, is not possible to determine without deeper and wider study.

For a community systematically and as a whole discriminated against and oppressed for many generations (possibly centuries), and having faced the ignominies of untouchability, the significant reduction in casteism is a major transformation. Whether there is an overall increase in the sense of equality amongst castes in the villages that the *vankars* live in, and more so whether caste as a phenomenon itself is on its slow way out, is difficult to say. Such an understanding would require more sustained involvement with and absorption in the community's life than was possible in this study.

Gender: There appears to be a general increase in women's empowerment, with weaving revival being one factor. Indicators include: women doing actual weaving (which was traditionally virtually non-existent) including in some cases teaching their husbands, women's role in pre-weaving being explicitly recognized and valued, women getting into processes they were not in earlier (e.g. dyeing, yarn treatment), young girls getting into the process and being more vocal, greater ability of women to go out of home/village for weaving-related events, participation in events like Women's Day, and so on. Innovation in weaving waste plastic into products has empowered women in Awadhnagar village, especially by providing an independent source of income. However several kinds of gender discrimination continue, such as the generally greater ability of men/boys to relate to the outside world. An interesting issue that has cropped up with women who now take much greater part in weaving, is the increase in work since they are doing both weaving and housework. In general while women are taking on more of what the men used to do, very few men are doing the converse, taking



The changing roles of women's association with weaving from doing the pre-loom processes, being in background, unseen and to the present where many are confident and aspiring weavers.

on what have been typically women's household tasks!

As in the case of the change in caste relations, 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 in positions such as village and wider-level decision-making bodies, access of girls to education opportunities, civil society programmes, are other factors.

At least in one case the study team encountered a refreshing level of confidence in a woman as a political functionary (sarpanch, or village council head), but in another case of a woman in a similar position, there seemed little independent thinking. It is therefore not clear whether such political empowerment indicates a trend in gender transformation. This may also be related also to the general weakness of linkages between the transformation in vanaat and political empowerment, which we come to later.

Age: The youth are clearly quite active in the vanaat revival, and able to speak about it confidently and assertively. A greater role in design, the ability to link directly to market in some areas, and networking amongst one another in one or two villages, are further signs. One major factor, other than general



Kankuben Amritlal Vankar of Kukma, sarpanch, explaining her ideas about good governance and her journey so far.

economic revival and young people's ability to make use of this, is the availability of avenues to know new designs and do marketing through digital platforms. Another factor, for several youth, is the training in artisanal craft (Handloom and Design) schools, which are attractive to many young *vankars* not only because they can learn new skills, but also because they help put a more 'modern' stamp on a traditional occupation. The return of several youth to weaving, noted above, is an important (even if for the moment small-scale) phenomenon.

Interestingly, deference to elders in both economic and socio-cultural matters still appears to be very strong.



Narayanbhai Vankar and his sons, Prakash and Prashant who are carrying forward the traditional livelihood of *vanaat*, Bhujodi

One issue the study tried to assess was: do the youth see *vanaat* primarily as an economic activity, more so than earlier generations? Perhaps this is the case, one indication being their complaints about the social obligations impinging on their work time. But it is clearly not exclusively an economic or market-oriented work, there are strong elements of culture, emotion, psychology, and affective relations with the work, as expressed by several youth (and as noted above in the point about weaving not being alienated labour). We come back to this below in 'Key findings, lessons and reflections'.

Nevertheless, some elders pointed to the concern that many youth are not interested in *vanaat* per se; they want quick results, so they go into other jobs where they are converted from *karigars* (artisans/ craftspersons) to *mazdoors* (labourers). The community needs to give more attention to this issue, actively encouraging the youth to stay in weaving, making it attractive for them to do so, showcasing examples where young people have returned to *vanaat*. The artisanal craft schools are seen as one tool for this. Additionally, the community needs to consider reviving earlier traditions of mutual help where a young person whose family could not afford it could still take up such opportunities with support from other *vankars*.

3.1.3 Ecological sphere

Handloom weaving, on its own, is considered to be an 'environmentally' sound manufacturing process, as compared with power loom and mill based weaving. But even within the handloom sector, there are a number of changes that impact the environment in different ways. For instance, the switch from local wool (used traditionally as a family-to-family relationship between pastoral Rabari community and the *vankars*), to externally produced acrylic or 'super' (Merino, initially from Australia, now also produced in India) wool in the last couple of decades of the 20th century, would have meant a very different set of ecological linkages and impacts. Currently a range of yarns are used by *vankars*, with Kala cotton having become much more prevalent than before; where and how the cloth or yarn is dyed has diversified with a lot of use of chemical dyes but a strong revival of natural dyes also; and where and how the produce is sold has also diversified with predominant sale taking place outside Kachchh but some continued local sale. Clearly, in environmental terms the following prominent narratives can be associated with handloom weaving sector in Kachchh, each with ecological ramifications:

- Clear shift from use of locally available raw material (yarn, natural dyes, sizing material), to procuring from outside



Traditionally, *vankars* used wild onion for preparing the yarn for weaving, a practise which has mostly disappeared



Inguri, also known as desert date, a locally available fruit was traditionally used in dyeing processes

- Significant increase in weaving with kala and bt (or other hybrid) cotton
- A shift in the scale of its value chain (from local to global)

While the initial intent of this study was to assess the ecological footprint of the handloom weaving sector as a whole, this was found to be impossible, given the enormous range of factors involved, and the limited time and resources available for the study. Overall observations were obtained on several

dimensions of the sector, but a more detailed and quantitative assessment has been done to compare the ecological footprint of Kala cotton value chain with other (mostly the genetically modified Bt) cotton.

The value chain of cotton consists of five critical stages-

- Cultivation of cotton (different cotton varieties and their input-production systems)
- Production of lint cotton through mechanised ginning process
- Production of cotton yarn through mechanised spinning process
- Production of fabrics/textiles by weavers, including yarn procurement, yarn dyeing and weaving process
- Marketing of finished products

Each of these stages have ecological footprint of different types. While the use of chemical, water, energy (electrical energy in ginning and spinning mills) and fuel (mainly for transportation) are key causative factors, a shift in use of different biological resources during the entire value chain also contributes in ecological footprint.

It is important to mention here that the figures emerging from these case studies (or from key informants at each value chain) cannot be applied to ‘represent’ the entire cotton weaving sector across Kachchh. Also, it was not possible to calculate and include the biodiversity component at this stage; hence, in this case, the ecological footprint is a calculation of two key components, carbon and water.

The study shows that the footprint of Kala cotton is nearly half as much as of Bt, indicating less

Table 1: Ecological (carbon and water) footprint of Kala and Bt cotton

weaver/unit ¹³	CO2 eq per kg of cotton value chain attribute to the weaver		Blue water* use per kg of entire cotton value chain attributed to weaver (litre)	
	Kala	BT	Kala	BT
Case 1	4.6	9.5	194	1838
Case 2	5.4	10.2	168	1884
Case 3	5.1	9.9	172	1837
Case 4	4.6	10.3	163	1884
Case 5	6.1	-	-	-
Average	5.22	9.98	174.25	1860.75

***Blue water is the water that is drawn from rivers, wells and ground for irrigation purpose, hence uses energy**

environmental impact of a locally produced organic cotton variety, despite the expanded trading of raw material and final fabric from outside the region.

The study found that if one looks at the footprint at each level of the value chain for Kala and Bt, the dyeing of yarn, especially where using chemical dyes, contributes heavily to both the water and carbon footprint. In addition to this, sales across the national and global markets add considerably to the carbon footprint from transportation.

13. The five ‘units’ studied are: four weavers making textile and different products from both the Kala and Bt cotton yarns , and Khamir which makes textile products only from Kala cotton yarn using only natural dyes.

While the use of Kala cotton in weaving is clearly ecologically less damaging than the use of Bt cotton, it should be a matter of concern that the shift away from localised production chains (e.g. local wool to local sale of wool-based clothes) to more global ones (yarns coming both from outside and within the region, and a lot of clothes being sold outside) has increased the ecological footprint. This is not restricted to Kachchh handlooms, but appears to have been a trend in many parts of India where crafts have revived on the basis of national and global markets.

In addition, following are a few areas of enquiry that are left out in this study, but considered vital to improve the overall result:

1. Transportation of lint cotton to other states for spinning purpose and their reverse transportation to Gujarat with yarns of different counts.
2. The production and transportation of agriculture chemicals and fertilizers.
3. The production of natural and chemical dyes.

Also, while carbon and water impacts are crucial parts of the Ecological Footprint Assessment (EFA), others like the impacts on biodiversity and pollution are also critical, and no attempt has been made to include them in this study.

There are other ecological aspects of the handloom weaving revival (not necessarily linked to the EFA per se) that are important, but that the study could not go into. For instance, enhancement in economic levels of the *vankars*, especially those who are doing commercially very well, seems to be leading to consumption patterns akin to those seen in the urban middle or upper middle classes. There does not appear to be any critical discussion amongst the *vankars* on this; however this aspect could not be studied to come to any conclusions.



Powerloom in one of the weaving clusters, Adhoi

Within this overall change towards greater ecological footprint, the attempt at some level of eco-friendliness and localisation in the Kala cotton production initiative, the gradual revival of natural dyes, and absence of any significant entry of powerlooms and any textile industry in Kachchh, are positive features from an ecological perspective.

3.1.4 Political sphere

There appears to be little or no linkage between weaving as a livelihood and the transformation it is undergoing, and the political aspects of the *vankar's* lives. A striking phenomenon is the absence or very weak manifestation of collective mobilisation relating to weaving in Kachchh, as compared to many other parts of India where weavers have collectivised as cooperatives, or as associations to take up advocacy on policy issues relating to their occupation. The last major mobilisation appears to have been around the time of India's independence, when shortage of yarn was taken up as an issue affecting weaving. A cooperative of *vankars* did exist in the latter part of the 20th century, but became non-functional reportedly due to internal dynamics and mismanagement, and has never been revived. Even on issues that had a significant impact on their lives, such as the imposition of high taxes under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) policy of the current central government, or of the 'demonetisation' of high-currency notes that took place in late 2016, there was no collective mobilisation. There is also no sign of collectivisation amongst the job workers to seek better working conditions (especially where still suffering from obvious exploitation), or collectivise/share resources to access markets directly and thereby become entrepreneurs themselves. This is partly also due to the fact that the relationship between the two classes of weavers is not only of employer-employee, but also a complex of social bonds, loyalty, and feelings of being indebted due to entrepreneur weavers having helped out in times of social or personal crisis. This has traditionally also been a significant part of India's caste system (*jajmani* relations of patronage), which has elements of mutual benefit but from a class analysis could be said to be a subtle form of exploitation.

This absence of what could be called 'non-party political process' amongst the *vankars* could be explained as an outcome of their individualised business tradition (which is strong amongst many communities in Gujarat, who are well-known for their entrepreneurial skills in many parts of the world!), the general sense that as businessmen they will scrape through one way or the other, and a non-confrontational culture. There may also be a more structural socio-cultural reason, with the many years of social oppression and livelihood struggles reducing the capacity to organise (though there was no articulation to this effect during the study).

There is also little or no linkage between *vanaat* as an occupation, and the electoral and party political process, from local to national level. A number of *vankars* have been in or currently occupy positions in local panchayats, district level bodies, etc, but this does not seem to be an outcome of their status as *vankars* or their increased economic status, and conversely their position is not used to enhance the prospects of *vankars* as weavers in village or larger society. Some panchayat members and sarpanches expressed that in their position, they would act for the benefit of all communities, not *vankars* in particular.

The linkages between state policy and the *vankars* are also weak. While in the late 20th century government policies (such as reservation for the handloom sector) and programmes (such as subsidies, or state procurement of handloom products) played a significant role, this appears to have diminished more recently, though some state institutions like Gurjari continue to do procurement. Indeed the examples of GST and demonetisation mentioned above, apart from the lackadaisical attempts by the government to reserve certain kinds of cloth production to the handloom and small-scale sector, suggest that the macro-policy environment has become even less conducive to handloom weaving (as to handicrafts in general). *Vankars* are accessing the market, with civil society organisations playing a key role in facilitating the value chain, and the state's role has receded into the background.

One recent change in this mentioned by several *vankars* is the issuing of weaver identity cards, after several years of promises, which are supposed to help them access general government schemes as also those meant for artisans, more efficiently. The community has recently been given an Aadhaar-enabled identity card by the Development Commissioner (Handlooms), which they can use to access government schemes, and direct benefit transfer promised by the government.

As an interesting offshoot of this study, and of a related visit to Himachal Pradesh by some members of the core study *vankar* team, discussion within the community to revive the weavers' cooperative has been strengthened. Additionally, the Kutch Weavers Association, dormant for some time now, has been re-activated (see below under 'Knowledge, creativity, innovations'), which may enable greater political mobilisation amongst *vankars* for livelihoods issues.

3.1.5 Knowledge, creativity, and innovation



Traditional cloth items woven by *vankars* before modern products and designs came into the markets.

Craft-based livelihoods have a distinct knowledge and skill base. Traditionally these have been passed down from parents to children, either by the latter simply being around the former when they were working and learning by observing, and/or being deliberately and systematically taught. In the case of handloom weaving, members of the younger generation have learnt mostly by observing their parents,

supplemented by deliberate imparting of skills only in the case of some exceptional techniques. Even today this form of knowledge and skill transmission is predominant, though it is now also supplemented by more formal learning opportunities such as artisanal craft schools.

Strikingly, though, compared to earlier, civil society interventions and the increasing market opportunities for the *vankars* have stimulated greater expression of creativity and innovation. The youth are not simply following the designs and techniques of their elders, but also innovating on these in trying to both create a market as also respond to it. The increasing incidence of women sitting on the loom has also created an opportunity for their creativity and innovation to be expressed. Remarkably, though, the younger generation of *vankars* continues to be committed to the particular motifs and patterns and weaves (including the extra weft that characterises the Kachchhi weave).



Champa Siju from Awadh Nagar experimenting with new designs inspired by the Rann of Kachchh

A major area of concern is the total absence of crafts learning in the official schools. This means that since children are increasingly going to school (a trend the *vankars* want to encourage), they are not learning weaving skills; and indeed may be exposed to the predominant orientation of formal education that livelihoods such as crafts, farming, and pastoralism are 'old-fashioned' and need to be abandoned in favour of modern skills. Recently Khamir and other organisations have proposed the introduction of craft learning in schools, and are hopeful that the district and state administrations will favour this. Senior *vankars* also desire this to happen, noting that when they were in school there was at least a class on *udyog* ('industry') where traditional practical skills could be learnt, which has now been replaced by learning on computers, with the arts and crafts being relegated to textbooks.

One of the reasons for the vast range of design innovation we are seeing today in a variety of yarns and applications, is an inherent core feature of Kachchh weaving skill. *Vankars* here differentiate their weaving as the ability to weave very fine designs (extra weft) in relatively coarser yarns. According to Premjibhai Siju, a Sant Kabir Awardee weaver, this is what distinguishes Kachchh from other handloom clusters. This implies a grasp over raw material and flexibility to work it with skill. A case in point is where weavers in Adhoi have adopted the *tangalia* technique (in which the weave creates raised dots and other patterns on the cloth) into Kala cotton, a skill they have picked fairly easily in the recent past from Gujarat weavers (also *vankars*) who were traditionally the specialists of the *tangalia* technique. Many weavers who had been weaving simpler designs in acrylic seem to have seamlessly transitioned to very fine cotton and silk weaving. The innovation then, seems to stem from this innate understanding, ability and command over material and technique. Shifting between fibres and techniques, and mastering dyeing which hitherto was the Khatri community's domain, shows such inherent skills as also an entrepreneurial spirit.

A potential source of tension relates to some initial signs of privatisation of knowledge and skills amongst *vankars*. Traditionally, the *vanaat* knowledge, designs, and motifs have been in the commons,

according to the vankar elders. Some young people who are individually innovating however feel that they need to be acknowledged and that it is not fair for others to copy their innovations. The youth feel that with professionalism there is some preference for individualization of designs rather than general sharing. There is also a rising trend amongst youngsters to create their own brands and products. However, there does not appear to be a cut-throat competition in any way, or serious resentment about being copied. The community by and large still seems to consider the weaving knowledge as being in the commons. A recent anomaly is the appropriation of the Kachchhi saris by one village (branding it the Bhujodi Sari), which several elders feel should not have happened; as Naranbhai Madan Siju of Bhujodi said “I gave my products the name Kachchh Carpets to enable other *vankars* anywhere in Kachchh to use the same brand”. The issue of privatisation of knowledge is recognised as something the community needs to talk about, to avoid tensions in the future.

In 2012, the *vankars* with the help of Khamir and the Ahmedabad Textile Industry’s Research Association (ATIRA)¹⁴ managed to get a Geographical Indication (GI) registration for the Kachchhi shawl. This was intended to stop the production and sale of cheaper imitations from industrial production facilities in other parts of India. The Kachchh Weavers’ Association (KWA) was specially formed for this purpose. However, the GI recognition has till now not had any palpable effect or special benefit, nor have the KWA and the weavers in general pushed for its proper use. In late 2018, the KWA has picked up the issue again, meeting with the local Member of Parliament and the District Collector, resulting in some proposed actions such as publicity about the GI and awareness amongst consumers to buy the authentic Kachchhi product rather than the imitations from outside.



Symbol of Geographical Indication recognition for kachchhi shawl

14. <https://atira.in>

Key findings, lessons and reflections



Discussion and analysis about various aspects of the study with the weavers, Bhujodi

4.1 General findings

It is important to note that many of the changes and transformations seen during the course of the study, are very recent, and no conclusion can be derived about their trajectory and sustainability. It will be interesting to see what directions they take, both for the vankar community and vanaat in Kachchh, as also for lessons relevant to weaving or craft elsewhere in India. Within this overall caveat, however, some broad findings can be stated as follows.

A general sense of well-being appears to have increased amongst the *vankars* in the 15 villages studied, especially relative to the period immediately after the earthquake in 2001, and this is closely linked to the revival of *vanaat* as a livelihood. Several *vankars* (especially but not only entrepreneurs, and including youth) mentioned their preference for weaving due to 'freedom' and autonomy it gives them, and the return of several young people into *vanaat* is a clear sign that the craft is doing well and attracting even those who could get other jobs. The ability and even preference of many *vankars* to stay back in (or return to) their villages, counter to the dominant narrative that enjoins oppressed castes and classes and especially Dalits to head to the city, has been enabled by a combination of enhanced economic opportunities within weaving itself, improved social status and other circumstantial factors, with the availability of communications and other technologies enabling 'urban-like' access and facilities. Combined with clear and consistent narrative on the reduction in casteism (esp. its worst forms of untouchability), greater contact with outside world, a visible sense of pride and dignity in their lives and livelihoods, and other factors, increase in well-being appears to be widespread in the villages studied.

To elaborate one of the above aspects: the revival of handloom weaving, while critically reliant on the existence of a market (local or national/global), is seen as a phenomenon with inter-related economic, social, cultural, emotional, intellectual elements and meanings. It is not merely a 'job'. The study recorded repeated assertions of the fact that *vankars*, including youth, were in it not only because of the income, but also because it provided them autonomy (control over means of production as a crucial element of this), freedom (in terms of aspects like when and how long to work), continued family and social connections since production was at home and involved the whole household, space for innovation and expression of creativity, identity (as a community, as a distinct craft identified by a unique Kachchh design), comfort compared to many other occupations they had access to (e.g. agricultural and industrial labour), a chance to express a spiritual responsibility (with *vanaat* skills being 'god's gift'), and other such non-economic aspects. Weaving does not appear to be an alienated form of labour for a substantial part of the community.

What is tangible here is the inherent self-confidence and creative growth that becomes possible when people flourish in practices that are in their heritage and conditioning. There is less alienation, possibilities for better integration with their own communities and enhanced ability for problem solving and navigating complexities of the market.

The complex of above elements could be seen as comprising the unique identity of the Kachchhi *vankars*; it is an identity with strong continuations from the past but also significant aspects of the present, with resilience, innovation and creativity, social and family bonds, the ability to hybridise the past with the present and future, and pride in the craft heritage as a not only economic but also culturally important.

This narrative suggests that even though the occupation is linked inextricably to the market, it has not undergone the transformation into commodification and alienation as envisaged by Marx (1844)¹⁵. Or in other words, the craftsman's labour has not been alienated from him/her. This has to do with many factors: the means of production, especially the loom, remains in the ownership or control of the producer family, even in the case of many job workers (though certainly not all, see below); even the product is at least partly in his/her control in that he/she can express creativity in it, and there is negotiating power over its value in the market; the weaver is able to see and control most of the process towards the finished product within the family rather than be a small cog in an industrial mass production system with extreme division of labour; and additionally a worldview that holds weaving as not only a commercial activity but also a cultural one, with important emotional, psychological,

15. As cited in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marx%27s_theory_of_alienation#cite_note-2

affective aspects. Indeed the alienation that many youth felt when joining other industries (many expressed how they were not in control of their time or of production there), seems to have been a major cause for coming back to weaving where they have a sense of ownership and belonging. A similar point could be made with regard to the dignity of labour that is evidently present in weaving (compared to other jobs as labourers in industry, construction etc), which Gandhi emphasised as a crucial aspect of human fulfilment¹⁶; and especially where the act of weaving encompasses both physical and intellectual labour. To quote Prakash Naran Vankar, a young weaver of Bhujodi, “my loom is my computer; I have to continuously think, innovate, it is not only mechanical”. Finally, it also points to a worldview that stresses less on the cold ‘efficiency’ of modern industrial life and more on a multi-dimensional ‘sufficiency’ paradigm where workers are not necessarily seeking to (or forced to) maximise productivity but rather also take into account what is enjoyable, self-governing, and creative (Bakshi 2017). The complex relationship between crafts (and the associated skills and knowledge), market, modernisation, and alienation (or the lack of it) has been well-brought out in studies in other sectors, such as artisanal fisheries by Sundar (2018).



Young weavers do not consider *vanaat* as mechanical, but rather embodying creativity and innovation, “The loom is my computer; I have to continuously think, innovate, it is not only mechanical”

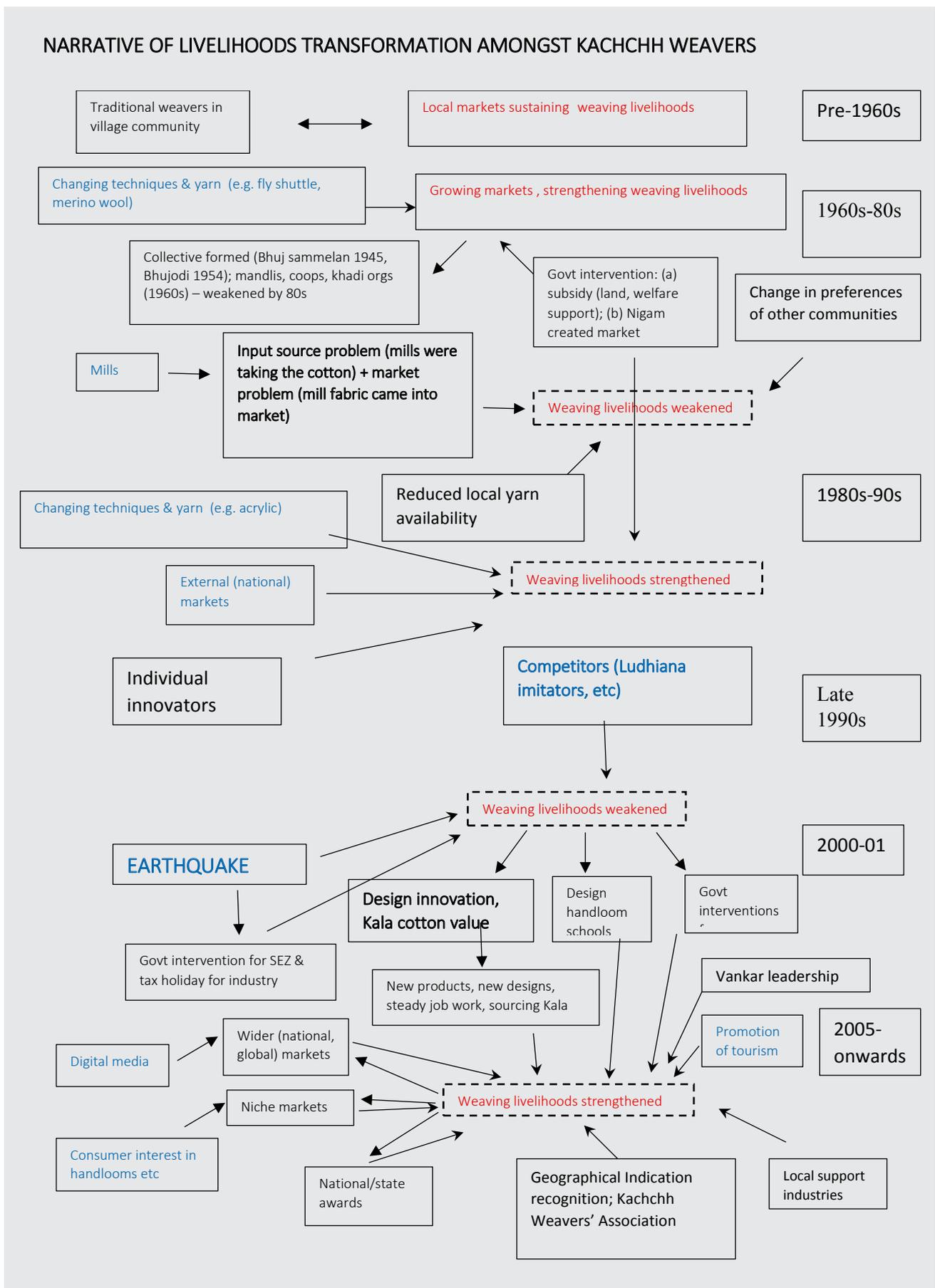
However, this is by no means universal. Several job workers expressed dissatisfaction with their economic and social life; some were clearly in distress, with signs of alienation and loss of dignity. There are marked geographic and class inequities amongst the *vankars*. Preliminary observations from the larger contextual survey being carried out across Kachchh (mentioned in the Introduction), suggest that a considerable section of the vankar community outside of the studied 15 villages is still facing several challenges. These include livelihood insecurity, where the enablers of transformation (mentioned below) have not been active.

16. <http://gandhiashramsevagram.org/voice-of-truth/gandhiji-on-dignity-of-labour-bread-labour.php>gandhiashramsevagram.org/voice-of-truth/gandhiji-on-dignity-of-labour-bread-labour.phpgandhiashramsevagram.org/voice-of-truth/gandhiji-on-dignity-of-labour-bread-labour.php

Along with the revival of *vanaat* has come a greater ecological footprint, in particular due to the significantly greater transportation of raw materials and of woven products to consumers in other parts of India and in Europe. This is a common thread in handloom clusters across the country. Interventions to try to make the craft ecologically more sensitive, e.g. through promotion of organic cotton and natural dyes, provide a counter-trend. The specific case of Kala cotton is interesting in providing these contradictory trends, with very low ecological impact of production but very high impact on the consumption side.

A historical time-line of changes taking place in the *vankar* community with respect to weaving and associated elements, suggests that transformations in the economic sphere have a significant bearing on those in other spheres of life. This does not of course mean that in all cases of transformation, the economic sphere is predominant or primary; conceivably in other situations a process of social or cultural or political transformation could drive economic transformation. And indeed even in the case of the *vankars*, the economic transformation itself involved or was influenced by a number of factors, including institutional and civil society interventions.

Figure 3: below represents the key findings. The red text denotes status of vankar livelihoods; blue are exogenous or indirect factors; black are endogenous or direct factors.



4.2 Enablers of transformation

Overall, the agents and drivers of the *vankars'* transformation, and paradoxically also of some regressive changes as described above, include:

- The skills, adaptability, resilience and entrepreneurship of the *vankars* themselves, their resoluteness in maintaining a traditional craft, and the initiatives by some leaders amongst them;
- Access to external markets, especially to *vankars* living close to the capital city Bhuj; this includes an increasing consumer base interested in eco-friendly products such as organic cotton, or in being 'responsible' consumers that can contribute directly to local livelihoods, or in 'ethnic' wear that is in fashion;
- Interventions by Khamir directly in the handloom weaving process, and of the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan and others in creating a general atmosphere of women's empowerment, and of several individuals including designers, government officials, innovators; Background factors such as greater access to formal education, enabling general capacities such as literacy to be built;
- Technological changes, enabling greater or easier production capacity and/or greater access to markets, one of the most recent being the use of cone for warping that significantly reduces the space and time needed compared to the traditional method;
- Availability of artisanal craft schools and institutions, facilitating the creativity and innovation inherent to the *vankars*;
- Local industries providing tools/equipment/materials for production, e.g. the Paddhar spinning mill.



Kala Cotton exhibition held in 2018 at Khamir to showcase the work going on in the handloom sector

A number of analytical points are emerging from the study. These can be seen in two categories.

4.3 Unpacking transformation

4.3.1 The nature of transformation

Several lessons can be learnt about the nature of transformation, from this study:

- In recent times the nature of the ‘conflict’ in the case of *vankars* has been seen as being primarily economic, i.e. to do with their occupation as weavers. Interventions and initiatives have therefore focused on this, leading to transformations in economic livelihoods. Transformations in other spheres of the lives of the community (such as in caste, gender, and generational relations) are linked to this, though not only this, as a number of socio-cultural factors also play a significant role. However, due to the strong focus on economic enhancement, it is likely that negative trends in some other spheres and elements, such as ecological impacts and inequality, have not been paid much attention, except by individual *vankars* and by institutions like Khamir, that too in a selective manner. This suggests that a single-dimension focus of transformation can have both positive and adverse consequences in other dimensions (linked to the next point). It is worth going into further aspects of this, such as who is engaged in single-dimension focus or whether there is any such conscious focus, who is seeing the multi-dimensional nature of its consequences, and how do the *vankars* themselves value the non-economic dimensions (which this study has not done in any depth).
- It is also important to realise that though in this case the economic dimensions of transformation appear to be the starting point, this may hide crucial factors that themselves lead to the foregrounding of economic transformation. For instance, as mentioned above, an important factor in this could be the inherent capacity of *vankars* to adapt and innovate, which is linked to cultural traits of the community (into which this study has not gone into any depth). In any community or society the multiple dimensions of life are interplaying in complex ways, and it may be too simplistic to say that transformation started with any one of them.
- Possibly one of the most important learnings in the study is that the transformation is are not necessarily internally harmonious, or coherent; i.e., positive trends in one element or sphere may be accompanied by both complementary and contradictory trends in others. This is not really surprising for anyone who has been involved in observing or being part of transformations in society, but it is nevertheless interesting and important to learn how precisely this complex and internally differentiated process plays out in a specific case. The economic transformation amongst the *vankars* has clear links to reduction in inequities in social spheres, but an increase in economic inequities; and while some dimensions of it have been ecologically sensitive or positive, others are significantly not. Some aspects seem to be neutral, such as that of political engagement and empowerment.
- Transformations also seem to have a strong scalar dimension, from the individual to the community, and both in space and in time. The economic and social transformations described above, for instance, are uneven both geographically and for classes within the *vankars*. They are uneven for men and women, for individuals within families, and so on. They are also not necessarily linear in temporal terms: an understanding of timelines of change in the last few decades also suggests that there may be cycles of transformation, with a sense of well-being going up and down; some elders spoke about how there was a sense of well-being in the decade preceding the earthquake, then a decline, and now a rise again. Will there be another low phase as, for instance, the market of Kala cotton products or for handloom products in general gets saturated or declines? *Vankars* say that one market or the other will open up for their products, and also suggest that weavers should be helped to diversify in acrylic use also (especially for those finding it difficult to use Kala cotton). Nevertheless, would some form of diversification help in greater resilience?

- These transformations have crucial power dimensions, as described in various sections above, e.g. the power relations between *vankars* and the market, between entrepreneurs and job workers, between Meghwals (dalits)¹⁷ and other castes, between men and women, between elders and the youth, between *vankars* and external institutions/researchers, and so on. In all these, there are changes in power dynamics, in some cases towards greater equality/equity, in others towards continuing or new inequalities/inequities. Is there an overall redistribution of power towards greater equality? This is hard to say, but there is a strong (not universal) narrative that things today are clearly less oppressive and exploitative than they were in the early part of this century, or earlier when traditional caste and gender relations were strongly entrenched.
- While there was little opportunity to go deeper and more explicitly into the sorts of ethical and spiritual values that underlie *vankar* society, and how these may be changing with the overall transformation, some of the articulations give us glimpses. For instance, there is an interesting balance of collective spirit and individualism in the work, the former displayed by continued sharing of design and product innovations, the latter in the way individual entrepreneurs have forged their individual paths and the absence of collective mobilisation on policy issues. When asked, there is a concern about issues of continuing or new forms of economic inequality, and poverty amongst a section of weavers; but as yet the absence of action to redress these. Equality between men and women may also be a growing value; we have no baseline study to prove this, but assertions by some women and acceptance of its need by some men seem like a relatively recent phenomenon. It is also likely that discussions over the several months of the study may themselves have generated new or increased reflection on core values within the *vankars*, the impacts of which will only be clear in the long run. More studies would be needed to delve deeper into how all this relates to the traditional worldviews of the *vankars*, as manifest in their religious and cultural traditions.



Discussion about the study with *vankar* women, Awadh nagar

- A key premise of the ACKnowl-EJ project is that transformative processes (i.e. those that are a challenge to and/or present alternatives to systemic or structural causes of injustice) are different from reformative ones. It is however not always easy or possible to distinguish between the two, partly because of the complexities noted above. For instance:
 - If there is transformation in the case of some parts of a community but not others;
 - If there is transformation in some elements / spheres but regression in others;
 - If there is a significant change in the manifestations of injustice, e.g. poverty, conflict, livelihood insecurity, displacement and dispossession, etc, but not visibly in their root causes, e.g. capitalism, masculinity, etc;
 - If there are transformations in some systemic/structural aspects of a situation, but not necessarily in values, e.g. reduction in masculinity or casteism but not necessarily an increase in overall value of equality.

Moreover, at any point of time it may be difficult to ascertain whether changes taking place, which seem to be reformative in creating spaces within existing systems, may lead to transformations because they eventually push the limits of the system to breaking point. Transformations can be sudden, or gradual, and in the latter case may be difficult to ascertain.

Several of the changes seen amongst the *vankars* could be seen to be transformative in that they are challenging the structures of injustice, but they are contradicted by others that are static or regressive. The structures of capitalism or statism are not explicitly or strongly challenged, though elements of it (such as the alienation of labour, or being at the mercy of state forces) are. It is not clear whether the values of social justice, equality and equity, ecological sustainability, and others that may underlie an overall positive transformation of society, are getting stronger or not. The study the refore does not make any conclusive statement regarding whether the overall changes taking place in the *vankar* community are a transformation towards an alternative (as defined in the Introduction); most certainly, it is not so in a holistic, integrated sense.

4.3.2 The nature of human agency

The role of enablers, direct and indirect, has also emerged in interesting ways in this study:

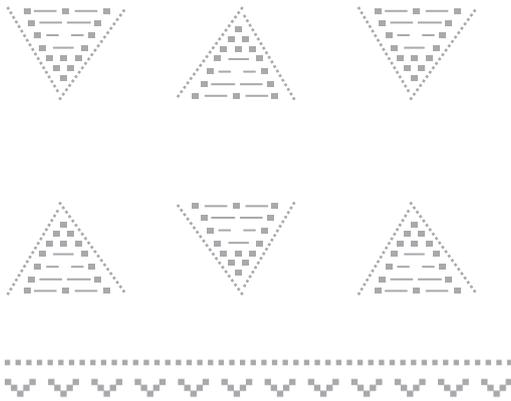
- While there are some very visible agents or enablers of transformation, such as in this case Khamir as an institution, the external market, and leadership amongst the *vankars*, there are also background structural or indirect ones that need to be unearthed and analysed more. These include technological innovation (both for production processes as also for marketing such as online platforms), the availability of different kinds of knowledge and information, opportunities for education providing general skills, and training institutions (like the artisanal craft schools). It is possible that even without one of these triggers the robustness, in this ensemble, could have happened. It would be impossible to pinpoint any one or two of these as the most important, or to assign weightages to their influence, or to assess the cross-influences amongst them, or to assess what particular combination of enabling factors worked here that was absent elsewhere in India where handloom weaving has declined, without a much more in-depth and longer study. Such a study could also look at how human agency is brought to bear on indirect or structural influences, once they are known or become visible.
- Another important insight gained is with regard to the 'alliances' that form (or, equally important, do not) in the transformation. These could be explicit or implicit, formal or informal, regular or sporadic, visible or invisible. The one between the *vankars* and institutions like Khamir or the artisanal craft schools is explicit, formal, regular, and visible; the one between *vankars* and some



Vankars accessing external markets through exhibitions and festivals

individuals/organisations who have helped in transformation over the last few decades, e.g. by introducing some new technology or helping spread information about woven products in Europe, may be less formal, sporadic, and at times even invisible. The one between *vankars* and people developing new technologies such as online marketing tools would be completely invisible, and it may even be a stretch to call it an alliance, but there is nevertheless a link that has significance for the transformation. And then there are the alliances that did not form, which is also significant; for instance the lack of collective mobilisation amongst the *vankars* against government policies adversely impacting them.

- Amongst the significant policy implications of these results is that for more sustainable, coherent and holistic transformation, there may be need for facilitation by external civil society and/or government. As an example, weavers struggling with the switch to Kala cotton, or job worker weavers who do not have their own capital to become entrepreneurs, could get special attention by such external players (or such players could persuade the more well-to-do *vankars* to themselves become such facilitators). These could be crucial factors in reversing some of the changes that are regressive or negative from a socio-economic justice or ecological sustainability point of view; while such changes are unintended, reversing them would have to be a planned strategy.



The future

The study results are pointing to a number of issues that need the attention of the vankar community, and of institutions working with them, especially Khamir. We would say even the government, except there has been little evidence of interest in the relevant institutions of the state so far. In particular the economic issues of inequality between entrepreneurs and job workers, the continuing distress amongst a section of *vankars*, the geographical imbalances in access to livelihood opportunities, and the ecological handprint issue, are worthy of such attention.

On a number of counts, the vankar community is both concerned about as also hopeful for the future. It realises that the macro-economic situation is not necessarily conducive, that young people have many other aspirations, that dependence on an external market is not necessarily secure. Like any other primary sector activity *vanaat* remains subject to a number of macro-economic factors that are not in the control or even under the influence of producers. However, the vankar community is hopeful that its adaptability and resilience will help it to survive as it has in the past, that the recent period of upswing could continue especially if *vankars* are able to continuously innovate and 'create' markets, and that institutions like Khamir and the artisanal craft schools will continue helping. Senior *vankars* realise that they will need to do more collective work (cooperatives, mutual help, advocacy), that special efforts are needed to encourage and incentivise the youth and women, and that issues like inequality and ecological impact need to be discussed and tackled. The vankar youth and women feel that given their increased empowerment, they can hope for continued enhancement in livelihood options.

It is however difficult for any of them to envision the future beyond this, as many of these issues are fresh or only recently coming into discussion. Whether more dialogue can take place meaningfully in a large and influential enough section of *vankars*, and whether this would lead to some relevant interventions with their own agency and those of others like Khamir, can only be told in future. This study itself, by initiating or encouraging conversations amongst the *vankars* on these issues, may act as a small trigger. For instance, at one of the final meetings to discuss the results of the study, some elder weavers proposed that the Kachchh Weavers Association organise a meeting with youth on visions for the future. As the various outputs of the study (including 6 short films relating to its key findings) get circulated and read/seen/heard, further such conversations may take place. Based on all this learning, both the weavers themselves, and institutions like Khamir, could continue playing an enabling role in further transformation.

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This is a study of the multiple dimensions of transformation taking place in the livelihoods of the *vankar* (weaver) community of Kachchh (Gujarat, India), linked to an overall revival of the handloom weaving (*vanaat*) craft from a time when it was in sharp decline. Using a participatory analytical tool called the Alternatives Transformation Format, the study assessed changes taking place in economic, social, cultural, political and ecological spheres of the community's life. It looked at whether such changes are towards justice and sustainability.

The study found four positive features of the transformation: an overall increase in well-being (especially economic) and a continued sense of identity and belongingness in relation to the craft; the retention or return of youth to *vanaat*; linked transformations towards reducing gender, caste, and generational inequalities; and a flowering of innovation and creativity, with hybrid knowledge, learning, and technological systems, while retaining the essence of Kachchh's *vanaat*.

However, it also found that there is increasing economic inequality between two broad 'classes' of weavers (entrepreneurs and job workers); increasing ecological footprint due to a shift from predominantly local exchange of raw materials and finished products to a more national and globalised exchange, though a rise in the use of locally grown organic cotton (*kala*) offsets this somewhat; and a near-absence (till recently) of collective mobilisation relating to livelihoods amongst the *vankars*.

The study explored key factors in bringing about such transformations, including the role of agency, and the key circumstances (in economy and society) that contribute. It looked briefly at how robust or fragile the transformation towards well-being is, and brought out key lessons for transformations towards justice and sustainability.

As a specific sub-focus in the study, an 'ecological footprint assessment' was attempted, comparing the impacts of *kala* cotton and genetically modified (Bt) cotton. This found a clearly smaller impact of the former.

The study is a collaboration amongst three partners: Kalpavriksh, Khamir, and the community of *vankars* as represented by some of its senior members. For Kalpavriksh, it was part of a global action research project, Academic-Activist Co-generation of Knowledge on Environmental Justice (ACKnowl-EJ), while for Khamir it was an attempt to understand the impact of its work with weavers and to gain insights for future involvement. For their part, the *vankars* were keen on documentation of the history of transformation, especially as a means of dialogue between generations.



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