Sustainable Textiles Programme BRIEFING
If I were to think back on what I think was the most important aspect of my learning, I would say it is design development. It gives me the confidence to innovate with designs.

I used to have a lot of hesitation, even in talking about my own production or my capacity, all this has changed after I attended my training. There are many women from the industry who visit us and I have gained in confidence by interacting with them. I have both learnt from them as well as taught them what I know. I do not hesitate to talk about my work any more.”

Kuldeep Kalukka, printer and dyer, Bagru, Jaipur.

Photo: Kuldeep in his workshop, Jaipur
Credit: TX/Allison Joyce
Introduction to INDIAN TEXTILES

Textiles have played a central role in Indian cultures and economy for millennia. Techniques, tools and learning related to handcrafted textiles production have been passed down over hundreds of generations. India is the world’s second largest textile producer and, the third largest exporter. It is the world’s largest producer of jute, the second largest producer of silk, the third largest producer of cotton, and the fifth largest producer of synthetic fibres. The textiles sector is reported to contribute around 14% to India’s industrial production, 4% to GDP and 17% to export earnings. It is the second largest employer in the country, providing direct employment to 35-45 million people.

However, the advent of economic globalisation, combined with rapid population growth and widespread availability of new technology, alongside a boom in the fast fashion industry, have reshaped the geographies of textiles production and consumption. This has had major implications for textile artisans and craftworkers, many livelihoods in the sector are increasingly under threat.

The textiles sector in India ranges from organised, capital-intensive factories producing clothes and other items at economies of scale, to the less regulated artisan-led cottage industries that use traditional handcrafted techniques. Due to the vulnerabilities faced by these cottage industries, and the high number of women and other socially marginalised groups within them, Traidcraft Exchange has intentionally focused its Sustainable Textiles programme in this part of the sector. In craft clusters, artisans and MSMEs (micro, small and medium sized enterprises) typically lack the networking and organisational skills to come together to access or exploit opportunities in the market. With limited working capital, artisans and MSMEs rarely possess the means to engage with large buyers directly, attend trade fairs and exhibitions, or reach out to online markets. They assume part of a value chain in which profit is disproportionately extracted by a relatively small number of more powerful players. Nonetheless, opportunities do exist for artisans to capture a greater market share, and various government initiatives and social security schemes exist to support viable and sustainable handcrafted textiles businesses. Research suggests the market for authentic, handmade gifts is on the rise, as India’s burgeoning middle class seeks unique items made using traditional methods. However, market access and awareness of government schemes amongst artisans and MSMEs remains low, in part due to the fragmented nature of the handcrafted sector, as well as the social and economic marginalisation of many artisan communities.

The role of marginalised communities and women

India’s handcrafted textiles sector employs large numbers of marginalised people. These include religious minorities, lower caste communities and ethnic minorities such as Adivasis. Women also play a central role in the sector, however, in many cases their contribution goes unseen and unrewarded. Within many handloom weaving households for example, women undertake critical pre-loom and post-loom activities, but their labour and skills go largely unrecognised, unlike that of the household ‘weaver’—often a husband, father, brother or son. For these groups, social marginalisation and poverty further exacerbate vulnerability to economic challenges faced by the sector. Occupational health and safety hazards can also have differentiated impacts on different groups, including on women compared to men for example.

Occupational Health and Safety

In the homes and small workshops that dominate India’s handcrafted textiles sector, artisans and craftworkers are commonly exposed to serious occupational health and safety (OHS) hazards. These include exposure to air-borne dust and fibres, chemical agents, solvents and dyes. Workplaces are often poorly lit, noisy, cramped and ill-equipped for the long hours artisans spend often in seated positions. In addition, without the capital to invest in new technology, many artisans are forced to use obsolete or unsafe machinery and equipment. As a result of these hazards, long-term respiratory, sensory, musculoskeletal and psycho-social health problems are common.

Environmental Impacts

In India’s highly fragmented handcrafted textiles sector, the vast number of production units tend to be poorly regulated with weak enforcement of environmental legislation and low levels of awareness of environmental hazards amongst artisans. ‘Wet processing’ activities such as printing and dyeing are notorious for their excessive water-consumption, and their use of a wide range of hazardous chemical dyes and solvents. Overuse and pollution of natural resources present major challenges to the textile industry, local authorities and local populations, particularly in densely populated and water-scarce states.

The textiles industry is the country’s biggest water polluter after agriculture. It uses thousands of different chemicals to wash, bleach, dye and print fabrics and yarn – many of which have adverse effects on human health. If disposed of in an untreated state, wastewater carries chemicals into watersheds that support biodiversity and provide irrigation for food crops and livestock. Large artisan clusters can produce millions of litres of unsafe wastewater (known as liquid effluent) each year, saturated with dyes, bleaches, detergents, brighteners, equalizers and other chemicals, carrying metals such as lead and mercury directly into waterways.

Key Stages Of The Textiles Supply Chain

- Production of fibre
- Spinning into thread
- Dying
- Weaving or knitting
- Printing and/or dying
- Tailoring
- Embelishment
- Marketing
Traidcraft Exchange (TX) is the sister organisation of Traidcraft Plc, one of the UK’s leading Fair Trade companies. Traidcraft Plc was established in 1979, and many of its first products sourced from suppliers in South Asia were handcrafted textiles. Over the years Traidcraft Plc has enjoyed long-term trading partnerships with handcrafted textiles specialists in India. Fair Trade businesses such as Aravali in Jaipur, Asha in Thane, Co-optex in Chennai, Creative Handicrafts in Mumbai, Sasha in Kolkata, and St Mary’s in Ahmedabad.

The practical experience within the wider Traidcraft family of working with and developing handcrafted textiles supply chains, as well as the challenges faced by the sector as outlined here, informed Traidcraft Exchange’s decision to put sustainable textiles at the heart of its India programme in the early 2000s. To date the programme has worked directly with over 24,000 artisans across Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, and disseminated practical resources and learning to thousands more MSMEs across the country. The programme complements Traidcraft Exchange’s programmes in the Indian cotton sector and across South Asia’s jute sector.

This project has given not only a new direction and energy to continue this craft in a cleaner manner, but also became a role model for similar craft-based industries. As a printer exporter, I feel that it’s our duty to contribute to this industry which employs so many artisans. This project has certainly made the craftsman proud of his/her profession as it has international exposure and thus encourages the younger generation to be motivated to respect hand-crafted textiles.”

Vikram Joshi, SME-owner and textile technologist, Jaipur

The programme has been implemented in partnership with our national level partner AIACA, the All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association, and through a consortium of local partners based in the targeted clusters. It has been generously supported by various project grants, including from the European Union’s Switch Asia Programme, the Department for International Development’s ‘Poorest Areas Civil Society’ programme, Textiles Recycling for Aid and International Development, as well as numerous Trusts and Foundations.
CONTEXT

CHURU
The programme has worked with over 300 tye-and-dye artisans from the Chhipa minority community in Churu. The craft uses large quantities of water and the use of chemical dyes is widespread. Exposure to many of these chemicals represents a major OHS risk for artisans, and the discharge of untreated effluent is highly polluting.

JAIPUR
The programme has worked with over 11,000 block printers, dyers, weavers and tailors in clusters in and around Jaipur. Water scarcity and quality is a prominent and urgent issue in the area: textiles clusters are notorious for their excessive water-use and for the discharge of hazardous untreated effluent.

KOTA
The programme has worked with 1,400 dyers and handloom weavers who use the traditional Kota Doria handloom weaving technique which uses a silk-cotton blend and produces lightweight finely woven sarees with a distinct square-check pattern. The technique is recognised as unique to the area (Geographical Indication).

UDAIPUR
The programme has worked with 1,500 women tailors from Adivasi communities in and around Udaipur. Adivasis continue to suffer social and economic marginalisation, with limited livelihood options especially for women.

VARANASI
The programme has worked with over 7,300 artisans in the city’s famous silk handloom weaving cluster. Weavers' livelihoods are threatened by competition from cheaper, imported synthetic textiles. Typically, handloom weavers lie at the bottom of a pyramid structure dominated by affluent traders that provide weavers with their only link to market and capture a disproportionate share of profits.

REST OF INDIA
Practical resources such as toolkits and programme learning have been disseminated to over 5,000 MSMEs across the country, including in textile clusters and integrated parks in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala, Manipur, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh.
Traidcraft Exchange’s Sustainable Textiles programme supports the development of eco-friendly textiles businesses. Building the collective power of artisans and craftworkers is at the heart of the approach. The programme also aims to improve production practices and business viability, strengthen links with markets, and develop resilience.

At the same time, the programme strengthens the ‘green ecosystem’ across the whole sector: building ties between businesses, institutions and government; demonstrating and disseminating practical resources; and establishing environmental sustainability and occupational health and safety on the policy agenda.

Through ‘Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Association’, consumers can get products at a cheaper price since they are sourcing from the weaver directly and the weaver too gets a higher price for his creation as the middle-men fees are waived.”

Handloom weaver, Varanasi
When we dye, we have to wear gloves; when we use chemical dyes then we have to wear masks, goggles and gloves; when we print, we have to wear an apron so that our clothes are clean; when we work on heating, we have to wear boots. All these were given to us in camps in which these safeguards were discussed and then the tool kits with these were given out.”

Dyer and Printer, Jaipur

...there has been a large change in my thinking. [...] Being able to talk to my buyers, to be able to explain things, to have the confidence to ask for my dues, these things I have learnt. How to talk about my work.”

Dyer and Printer, Jaipur

In each target cluster, the programme supports artisans and their MSMEs to improve production. Improved practices aim to improve quality, productivity, environmental sustainability and safeguard occupational health and safety (OHS). Practices vary according to craft; eco-friendly changes include: transition to azo-free dyes, use of shared washing facilities, water-use reduction and upcycling of waste materials. OHS encompasses use of personal protection equipment, safe handling of chemicals, adjustments to working environment, and guidance on posture.

In the programme’s first phase, over 1,000 artisans in and around Jaipur were trained on a range of production methods, including block printing, tie-and-dye, and tailoring. 80% of trainees were women, and 79% of trainees found work shortly after attending the programme. Training on block printing was particularly well-received and praised as the first of its kind. In the second phase, over 277 SMEs made changes to their production practices to be more eco-friendly.

In Udaipur, 1,500 Adivasi women learnt new skills in tailoring of waste materials to create upcycled textile products. In Lucknow, women embroiderers were introduced to improved seating postures and regular exercise routines. Ergonomically designed tables, frames, chairs and stools were introduced at the federation’s main centre. In Sanganer, Jaipur, ergonomic changes were made to the washing area, where workers had previously stood in water for long hours.

To enable artisans to develop financially sustainable and commercially viable businesses, training has been provided to artisans and their institutions on key topics such as: business planning, financial management, operations, quality assurance, stock management, logistics, marketing and Goods and Services Tax requirements.

In the programme’s second phase, over 1,500 artisans received training, as well as 145 SMEs and five cluster level federations. In Varanasi, 90% of the participants reported that this was their first experience of participating in a training.

In Varanasi, handloom weavers’ links to markets have historically been controlled and dominated by small numbers of rich traders. The ‘Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Society’ was set-up in part to challenge this status quo by supporting more direct links to markets for its members. It’s website, www.varanasiweavershub.com, provides a catalogue of products as well as a directory of member weavers and their specialisms. Weavers in Varanasi are now selling their products via e-markets such as gocoop.com and jaipore.com, as well as directly to consumers via WhatsApp messaging.

The programme commissioned market research on current trends in international and national markets for sustainable handcrafted textiles. Findings were disseminated through workshops with businesses and artisans. Training was provided on marketing, new product design, and relevant certification schemes. Exhibitions and buyer-seller meets were also organised to enhance the visibility and market linkages of artisans and MSMEs. In the programme’s second phase, new eco-certification standards were developed to complement the current ‘Craftmark’ scheme run by programme partner AIACA. The intention was to help consumers more easily select eco-friendly handcrafted textiles, with a longer term of ambition of catalysing demand.

The programme has sought to address some of these limitations by raising awareness, supporting artisans to complete necessary forms, and in some cases submitting forms on their behalf to relevant agencies.

In India a number of social security schemes are available specifically for artisans. These include artisan cards, bank accounts, low-interest loans, health insurance, life insurance, and subsidies for key inputs. However, due to a combination of factors, uptake tends to be low; these include: low levels of awareness amongst target populations, lengthy application processes, unavailability of documentation, low levels of literacy, social restrictions on women’s mobility within some communities, and simple paucity of time amongst artisans and craftworkers. The programme has sought to provide a service to relevant agencies.

In the programme’s second phase, over 12,900 artisans were supported to apply to at least one social security scheme. This included more than 7,000 artisans in Varanasi, more than 3,000 in Lucknow, over 1,000 in Jaipur, over 800 in Kota, and more than 900 in Udaipur.
Developing the Sustainable Textiles Eco-system

Alongside developing eco-friendly textiles businesses and building the collective power of artisans and craftworkers, the programme works more broadly to strengthen the ‘green ecosystem’ across the whole of the handcrafted textiles sector. It aims to: build ties between businesses, institutions and the state, including through public-private partnerships; demonstrate and disseminate new models of working and practical resources; put environmental and occupational health and safety concerns on the policy agenda; and stimulate domestic demand for sustainable textiles.

FACILITATING PARTNERSHIPS FOR INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

The Jaipur Integrated Textile Park (JITP) in Bagru is an example of a public-private partnership supported by the programme. It was initiated under the Government of India’s ‘Scheme for Integrated Textile Parks’ and is shared by around 17 textiles SMEs (members of COTEX – Consortium of Textile Exporters). COTEX acquired the land for the park, the government financed the construction of the park, and the first phase of the Sustainable Textiles programme part-financed the construction of the park’s Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP). The CETP is a complex series of tanks, filters, and chemical processes that recycles and treats the wastewater produced by businesses based in the park. The park also features water tanks, a large rainwater storage reservoir, and solar panels. In addition, and again through partnerships with government, the programme has established five Secondary Effluent Treatment Plants (SETPs) in craft clusters in Rajasthan and neighbouring Gujarat, with local SMEs contributing towards set-up costs.

As a result of advocacy work undertaken in the programme’s first phase, OHS issues within the handcrafted textiles sector were raised with the national government’s Planning Commission—the body responsible for setting the agenda for five year plans. In response, India’s 12th Five Year Plan, which ran from 2012 to 2017, included key standards for OHS for the sector. Prior to the programme there had been little to no national policy in place for OHS provision.

In the programme’s second phase, consultation with artisans, partners, regulatory bodies and key decision-makers led to the publication of a policy paper entitled ‘Gaps in Craft Policy’. The paper was submitted to the chief minister of Rajasthan, as well as other key officials.

"With the treatment of effluent from the printing process we are now able to treat and reuse about 30,000 to 40,000 litres of water per day which was previously released untreated in the nearby ‘Luni’ river. We are now able to save the said amount of water and decreased the procurement of fresh water from distant places."

MSME Manager and Block Printer, Balotra

"Practically-orientated knowledge products have been disseminated to over 5600 MSMEs across the country. These include a comprehensive ‘Toolkit of Sustainable Textiles Production’ which explains key topics, including: responsible water-use, safe use of chemicals, ETP technologies, OHS, sourcing sustainable raw materials, current government eco-initiatives. The information is illustrated with case studies, diagrams and checklists. It has been disseminated in clusters and Textiles Parks in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala, Manipur, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh. It is freely available online here."

The JITP and its flagship CETP continue to draw visitors from across the country who come to learn about the technology and its benefits. In addition, the highly-regarded training on block-printing attracts textiles professionals who come to see it in action and utilise the module in their networks.

The JITP CETP cleans and recycles the effluent produced by the park’s businesses, achieving zero liquid discharge. 85% of the water needed for their textile production is drawn from water recycled by the system, reducing the pressure on local water sources by 470,000 litres per day and saving businesses an estimated €255 in water costs per day.

The programme raised the profile of occupational health and safety (OHS) issues in the handcrafted textiles sector with key policy-makers within national and state governments. Reports and policy briefs were submitted to various key committees, and state-level consultation workshops were held bringing together industry experts, businesses, civil servants and elected representatives.

"The programme seeks to extend its impact beyond the core clusters where it has been most active. Knowledge products such as toolkits have been disseminated across the country and the Jaipur Integrated Textile Park in Bagru is now a flagship example of sustainable textile production, visited by industry stakeholders from across India."

The programme's first phase, new SETPs were established in clusters in Balotra and Lunakansar in Rajasthan, and Bhuj in Gujarat. By recycling water used by local artisans, each SETP saves thousands of litres of water a day and is estimated to save local businesses around €191 per day. Around 1,680 MSMEs benefit from these, representing around 8,400 artisans.

In the programme’s second phase, new SETPs were established in Udaipur and Sanganer, Jaipur. In Sanganer this prevented the loss of livelihood of 200 artisans, who had been served a closure notification from the state government’s ‘Pollution Control Board’ due to the effluent discharged in their previous production practices.

In Kota, the cluster’s federation was successful in lobbying the Rajasthan Urban Development Authority to revive the ‘Common Facility Centre’ in Kethun, eastern Kota for use by women weavers. The CFC is now fully functional and managed by the federation.

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Nexus between environmental sustainability and OHS

The programme demonstrates the important nexus between issues of environmental sustainability and artisan/craftworker occupational health and safety. The two issues are often inextricably linked, and seeking to address these issues jointly can be effective on both fronts. In many cases, addressing OHS issues for artisans and craftworkers offers immediate and tangible benefits. This in turn can generate buy-in on longer-term issues around environmental sustainability which may not always appear urgent for artisans and small businesses operating in competitive markets and with very limited access to information, training and resources.

Empowering Women

The programme demonstrates that work within the Indian handcrafted textiles sector has a high potential to benefit and economically empower women. The programme provides numerous and diverse examples of where women have benefited: enhancing skills and increasing visibility in production and market, taking-up leadership positions within producer institutions and interacting with relevant government authorities, improving access to social security schemes and strengthening resilience. However, whilst none of these outcomes were unexpected as such, the programme did not have the empowerment of women as an explicit objective or aim. It therefore lacked a clearly articulated strategy for this aspect of the work. As a consequence, achievements in this area are difficult to document systematically and consistently across all clusters. Traidcraft Exchange's 2018-2023 strategy however, puts women's empowerment at its centre and the organisation has invested in developing a clear approach for this: available here. The next phase of the programme will have the empowerment of women at its heart and a fully developed programme strategy for this important objective.

Moreover and more specifically, it is also important to recognise where the programme to date has not achieved all that Traidcraft Exchange would have liked in relation to women’s empowerment. The work with the weavers’ cluster in Varanasi provides an important example of where women play a critical but largely invisible role: providing pre-loom and post-loom auxiliary support, without which the male weavers would be unable to weave. The experience of the programme is that in order to reach these women, it is critical to address some of the key challenges experienced by the male weavers they work with. The two sets of gendered roles are part of the same economic system and cannot be considered in isolation. But crucially, addressing the challenges experienced by both men and women takes time and requires longer-term programming.

Advantages and challenges of diverse partnerships

The contribution of artisans to the Indian economy and to the culture of the nation is widely recognised. This, in combination with the rapidly growing economy and the developmental priorities of national and state governments, means there is a high potential for collaboration between government, the private sector and civil society. This can enhance sustainability and bring scale, as demonstrated by the development of the Jaipur Integrated Textile Park which is central to this programme. Nonetheless, such partnerships are not without their challenges, and the experience of Traidcraft Exchange is that flexibility must be built into project design to enable key activity streams to continue in the event of unexpected hurdles delaying other activity streams within the overall programme.

LEARNING & questions that remain

In the beginning, the women used to hesitate to come out, now they have opened up. I used to have to call them 10 times for them to come to the centre, now I have to just inform them once and they come. They used to be shy to say their names, now they are able to have a conversation. They have also received these trainings and enhanced their skills. Some women have set up shop on their own.”

Programme Partner Staff Member, Udaipur

Ranjana Trivedi at a tailoring workshop, Udaipur. Credit: TX/Allison Joyce
Consumer awareness and demand

Whilst the programme enabled significant improvements in eco-friendly production practices across artisan clusters in northern India, supporting growth in consumer awareness and demand for sustainable textiles was more challenging. Market research indicates that this awareness and demand is growing amongst the burgeoning middle class, but was there more the programme could have done to support and accelerate this? Consumer pull is often necessary to sustain investments required at the production end.

Eco-Certification

Linked to the above point regarding consumer awareness and demand, part of the programme strategy to inform, educate and enable consumers to select sustainable textiles was the development of new eco-certification standards. Traidcraft Exchange as a Fair Trade organisation has a long history of supporting the development of new certification schemes. However, when it came to the eco-friendly production of textiles products, the programme underestimated the time required to fully understand the variety and complexity of technical environmental impact issues and the resulting certification requirements. In short, the eco-certification standards took longer to develop and launch than expected, resulting in less time for the programme to support consumer education and nurture demand. In addition, the importance of ensuring certification standards enable and help producer businesses to graduate along a spectrum of improved sustainability is a critical learning here.

Adaptive Management: meeting emerging needs

During the course of the programme, the Indian government’s new ‘Goods and Services Tax’ was introduced nationwide. For the small producers, understanding and implementing the new ‘Goods and Services Tax’ was a huge challenge. The programme team was able to adapt the programme accordingly, integrating support on this critical topic into the business skills training provided through the programme.

Balancing support to and investment from partner businesses

Some of the MSMEs that participated in the programme were unable to make the monetary investment required to create and promote samples of new designs developed in line with market research commissioned by the programme. For other MSMEs the investment required was manageable. Programmes of this nature that work with private sector actors within economically vulnerable communities tread a fine balance between supporting and subsidising these actors. Screening processes need to be sufficiently detailed and nuanced to be able to make this distinction without overburdening programme staff and businesses with lengthy and cumbersome processes. Getting this process right probably requires time and collaborative working between partners, informed and guided by regular reengagement with the overarching objectives of the programme.

Capturing the diversity of achievements

The programme’s achievements in relation to environmental sustainability are numerous and diverse. This diversity reflects the variety of environmental issues faced within the sector and by the heterogeneous actors that constitute it. For some the discharge of untreated effluent is the key issue; for others it is the need to transfer from using azo dyes to azo-free dying, for others it is excessive water-use, for some it is all of these issues. Designing manageable and affordable Monitoring, Evaluation and Learnings systems that capture the level of detail and nuance required to guide and inform programming, whilst at the same time capturing overall achievements in a substantive way is challenging. More investment was required earlier in the programme to develop an appropriate system for the complexity of contexts and programme.

This programme briefing documents the approach, achievements and learning of the Traidcraft Exchange Sustainable Textiles programme in India. It draws upon research undertaken by Tom Lawrence: we extend our thanks to him for his hard-work and support. We hope the briefing will catalyse discussion and debate with other like-minded organisations and individuals committed to ensuring the inclusive and sustainable development of the sector. The Traidcraft Exchange Sustainable Textiles programme has been implemented in partnership with the All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association, the Calico Printers Cooperative Society, Consortium of Textiles Exporters, Disha Shekhawati, Health and Social Development Research Centre, Kota Women Weavers Association, the Human Welfare Association, the Self-Employed Women’s Association, and Vishvas Sansthan. We thank them for their ongoing hard-work and commitment. The programme has been generously supported by project grants from the European Union’s Switch Asia Programme, the Department for International Development’s ‘Poorest Areas Civil Society’ programme, Textiles Recycling for Aid and International Development, as well as numerous Trusts and Foundations. We would like to thank them all for making this work possible.

Before I took the training, I knew to stitch but I could not have imagined that I could stitch for others; I used to be afraid that I would spoil someone’s clothes and they would scold me, but now I have confidence.”

Pinky Joshi, Tailor and Self-help Group Leader, Udaipur

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