

CRAFT SEEDING THROUGH SKILL DEVELOPMENT: THE HEART-FELT PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The study presented here is part of a broader doctoral investigation that systematically explores the interplay between design, craft and community development in India. It elucidates the latent potential inherent in craft and design practices in India, transcending mere aesthetic considerations. The venerable traditions possess the capacity to uplift marginalized communities, thereby catalyzing sustainable development.

Furthermore, the findings highlighted the need for tailored strategies that recognize the intrinsic value of crafts. By collaborating with local stakeholders and fostering an inclusive approach, meaningful and sustainable change can be facilitated that uplifts marginalised communities while celebrating their unique cultural identity.

Method: This study uses practice-based qualitative research methods, including action research and design thinking. Charles Owen defines design thinking as an active engagement process that generates knowledge, similar to the concept of action research introduced by Kurt Lewin. Nigel Cross emphasizes that design knowledge is distinct to the field of design practice and is acquired through practical experience and reflective analysis. In this context, both the designer and researcher should recognize their roles as active participants when collaborating with their subjects within an established research paradigm.

Results: The study conducted thus far presents the outcome of skill development workshops conducted, leading to the modelling of a 'craft seeding' framework. It is an outcome of actions, observations, and reflections documented during on-field work experiences while working with marginalized rural community.

Conclusion: In 2023, 'Project Heart-Felt' completed its second round in Tshuntwari, a remote village near international borders in Srinagar, India. This project investigates how organizations and communities work together to bring about positive change through design and entrepreneurial craft initiatives. It improves artisanal skills and offers therapeutic and creative benefits, promoting community growth and ecological harmony. This effort supported under Operation Sadhbhavna by the Indian Army, aims to promote civic peace and social development in the region.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between people and their environment within their historical, cultural, and social contexts is reflected in local crafts. Communities grow through association and assimilation— this process can be expedited by craft. As witnessed in thriving craft communities of India, craft plays a vital role in uniting people, fostering sense of

belonging, shaping regional identities, and generating livelihoods. Popular development dogmas like innovation, planning, and the information economy are often contrasted with craft (Jones, et al., 2021). In recent times, there has been a resurgence of interest in craft as a means to strengthen local and regional economies, skills, and materials, while contributing to broader educational, cultural, and economic policy objectives (Wood, 2011; Miller, 2017). This shift underscores the need for more nuanced definitions of 'local' within the broader movement towards using craft to drive creative placemaking and economic growth (McHattie, et al., 2019).

In the absence of any formal economic activity, craft can become source of alternative income for rural communities to meet the local need utilizing local resources (ILO, n.d.). It challenges capitalism exploring community-based initiatives, cooperatives, and craft-led economies, emphasizing their potential to create sustainable ecosystems (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2011). According to the World Bank Data (World Bank, 2018), 64% of India's population is estimated to reside in rural areas covering over 0.6 million villages characterized by varied geographical conditions, lifestyle, traditions, customs and resources. Most of these settlements are underdeveloped lacking access to basic necessities. The situation worsens for villages situated at International Borders (IB) or Line of control (LoC). The Indian Army is actively involved along with other government/nongovernment run initiatives, providing facilities and promoting development in these remote regions through Operation Sadhbhavana (Indian Army, n.d.).

This study shares an ongoing philanthropic project in the Tshuntwari village situated in Macchal region of Srinagar, aiming to empower local women through a craft-led skill development initiative. The project supported by the 21 Mahar Regiment of the Indian Army focuses on enhancing confidence, fostering self-reliance, promoting community engagement, contributing to placemaking, and establishing sustainable livelihoods. Addressing socio-cultural barriers associated with traditional gender roles and marginalized girls' education is at the heart of this effort.

As a researcher and designer specializing in craft-led ecosystems, author has approached this challenge through the academic lens of craft and design. The goal is to empower women by imparting valuable skills while transcending traditional gender roles and promoting community-oriented sustainability.

Scholarly research has been undertaken to extensively explore the complex and multifaceted relationship between craft, design, and community building. There remains abundant evidence on the empowering aspects of craft practices and artisan empowerment; however, there are significant knowledge gaps regarding how these craft skills can empower marginalized communities in regions where such traditions are absent. The study reports the outcome of a "craft seeding" initiative that has finished two phases so far, aiming to use craft as a strategy for youth empowerment and community development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Craft has continued to be a prominent illustration of human innovation throughout history, representing crafting as an essential human pursuit (Stevens, 2020). The Industrial Revolution posed a threat to handicraft through mechanized mass production, leading to the establishment of the Arts and Crafts movement aimed at preserving the significance of handcrafted work. This era saw a mutually beneficial relationship between industrialization and modern craft, with potential for similar adaptations in the future (Adamson, 2013). The anticipation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution is expected to bring about a post-humanist era characterized by technologies that blur the lines between physical, digital, and biological domains.

Notably, recent years have witnessed a shift in the humanities and social sciences toward posthumanism. This paradigm encourages a focus on materiality, environment, and knowledge, moving beyond human-centric perspectives in practice-driven fields such as craft and design (Forlano, 2017; Stevens, 2020). This shift is significant for the fields of craft and design because it encourages considering ecological impacts, material lifecycles, and technology collaboration. This approach could innovate the way objects are created and their intended functionalities, leading to more sustainable practices. Complementing western views, non-western knowledge forms that emphasize the importance of nature, indigenous ecological systems, material resources, artefacts, technology, processes, concepts,

and more can help position craft in 'Post-humanism'. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi:

"The purpose of life is undoubtedly to know oneself. We cannot do it unless we learn to identify ourselves with all that lives. The instrument of this knowledge is boundless, selfless service." (Gandhi, 1932)

Gandhi's post-humanist perspective included Ahimsā (non-violence) as a relational ethics. Presently 'Ahimsa' silk, commonly known as peace silk or vegan silk, which is made in small scale as a cottage industry in India without harming the silkworm, supports a diverse community of rural silk farmers. Indian fashion designers are gaining international recognition employing craft in their practices and are leveraging the nation's textile expertise and artisans' diverse skills to gain traction globally (Edwards, 2018). Indian indigenous crafts show intersectionality of culture, ecology and community who play the role of custodians.

Craft significantly contributes to the understanding of novelty, skill, identity, ecology, materiality, concepts, and processes (Ranjan, 2009; Moses, 2012; Adamson, 2010; Ingold, 2013). Both design and craft practices incorporate the essential elements of thinking and making (Nilsson, 2013; Groth, 2016). Nevertheless, design frequently adopts a humanistic perspective, positioning 'human' agency as central to its process (Olsen, 2010; Nina, 2015; Dantas, 2012; Forlano, 2017) relegating more-than-human actors to secondary roles which could be harmful (Norman & A., 2005; Weaver, 2019; Wakkary, 2021). Studying various craft in its native context reveals harmonious co-existence among its elements, nurturing its culture, ecology and community. Therefore, it can be beneficial to investigate the impact of introducing craft through skill seeding within a community on the place's narrative, culture, ecology, and overall placemaking.

METHODOLOGY

Post-humanistic ontology involves interconnected thinking and is not limited to a single domain or discipline (Simonsen, 2013; Haraway, 2004; Whatmore, 2013). This practice-based research (Walker, 2013; Igoe, 2013) delves into the post-humanist perspective to comprehend the 'interconnectedness' between human and more-than-human elements within an ecosystem. The article presents work and findings from a larger doctoral study with research work conducted in phased manner using a bricolage approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Yee & Bremner, 2011). Field work employs diagnostic research to identify and analyse the causes of a problem or factors contributing to a social issue. To investigate 'interconnectedness' between human and more-than-human, ANT framework (Latour, 1999) is employed as a tool and situates the idea of incorporating crafting activities as a strategic approach for promoting youth empowerment and community development. Action Research (Lewin, 1946) (Fig 2), inclusive of design thinking framework prioritizing traits including empathy, holistic problem framing, rapid ideation, prototyping, and iterative testing (IDEO, 2009; IDEO, 2018) is subsequently employed to navigate through project challenges and sense making simultaneously by the practitioner-researcher (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Berg & Lune, 2007).

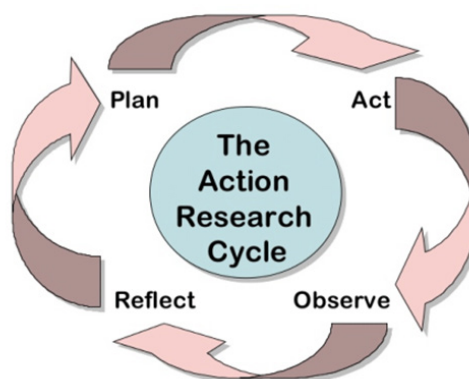


Fig. 2. Action Research Framework (Nelson R. 2., 2014)

Voicing the post-humanist perspective on Design, Laura Forlano, encourages designers to begin with following questions (Fig 1):

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Who or what – human/nonhuman, human/animal, individual/organizational/network¹¹ – are the user(s), and for whom or what should the design be desirable? 2) How, and in what ways – competitively/collaboratively, hierarchically/horizontally – are capabilities, agency, and power distributed across human, machines, and natural systems? 3) What new knowledge(s), questions, stakeholders, and partnerships are needed in order to adequately design for this problem? 4) How are ethics,¹² values, and responsibilities reflected and embedded throughout the design process? |
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Fig. 1. Question framework (Forlano, 2017)

During initial discussions, the philanthropic partners expressed their desire to fund a customized youth empowerment and skill development program. The vision was to empower women in the community to come forth, contribute to place-making and learn skills that can be turned into viable livelihood options. They highlighted challenges such as high drop-out rates, underutilization of facilities, and declining interest in practicing the taught skills with previous programs like tailoring, sanitary pad making etc despite efforts to incentivize participation and work.

Introducing craft-based skill development under vocational training for youth, specifically focusing women, in a region unfamiliar with such hand-made practices proved challenging without any existing post-humanist ecological framework for reference. As per the requirement of sponsors and utilising How might we (HMW) technique of framing questions (Siemon, et al., 2018) the initial enquiry was framed before diagnostic field work (Table 1).

Q1↵	<i>How might we design a skill training program that leverage craft and design knowledge to empathize and engages with the local community, its history, ecology, culture and social construct?↵</i>
Q2↵	<i>How might we develop craft-led design strategies that can empower the community’s wellbeing including its human/more-than-human agencies, helping place- making, creation of livelihood and its sustenance?↵</i>

Table 1 HMW (How Might We) questions to investigate skill, craft, design, and community.

To set this skill development program apart from regular training, following was envisioned and proposed as a strategic framework outlining objectives for phase I and II. (Table 2).

Stage	Process	Objectives
I	'Craft Diagnostic'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyzing the local ecosystem, considering human and more-than-human factors, income opportunities, and training requirements. Engaging the local community and social partners to identify local opportunities, overcome obstacles, and utilize their expertise in program implementation.
II	'Craft Seeding'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting knowledge of empowerment, craftsmanship, and design through educational discussions, highlighting the importance of both human and non-human elements Encouraging self-awareness, community engagement, social accountability, and growth through education. Introducing a progressive training program for craft skills that caters to local requirements and engages with various groups. Assessing and recording progress at each stage of the training program. Communicating the learning journey with the wider community to encourage the embrace and admiration of traditional crafting practices.

Table 2 Strategical framework for craft-led skill development initiative (Phase I and II).

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

PHASE I (2022)

During the 5-day field study in the village of Tshuntwari, the complex interactions between human and more-than-human elements were investigated. Located near LoC at an altitude of 10,000 ft above sea level, the village grapples with challenges arising from both human activities and environmental factors. An Action Research plan (Table 3) was developed to understand the community better and evaluate opportunities for craft-based design interventions while devising strategies to empower women through skill development.

	PLAN	ACT	REFLECT	OBSERVE
1.	Primary talk with sponsoring agency, understanding their vision to devise particulars of the project and role as a facilitator.	Field visit: Interaction with sponsor, head of the village, women participants as part of diagnostic research.	Field notes: journaling to be used for self-reflection, encompassing an evaluation of what was successful, what encountered difficulties, and any unexpected variables that should be considered in the future.	Identifying connection with human/more-than-human agencies using ANT Framework.
2.	Secondary Research about the place, its history, culture, ecology, material etc.	Establishing context: Mapping of history and culture of the place to find possible linkages with craft.	Collective Reflection sessions by observing craft as a culturally engrained phenomena, its interconnectedness to ecology to sensitize trainees.	Observing peer to peer interaction, human-non-human agency interaction during the course of training.
3.	Shortlisting crafts and skills that are relevant to the material found in area.	Resource mapping: Available natural resources that can be used as raw material for craft work.	Case studies of indigenous craft communities with troubled past and challenging environment followed by group discussions to understand how they harnessed ecology and creativity through craft.	Observing the community behaviour towards trainees and their craft during exhibition.
4.	Development of interaction guide developed based on Empathy Map (Gray, 2017).	Mapping existing skills that participants have		Observing sentiments of trainees towards craft work and their learning.

5.	Craft Tool kit for exploration to test ideas. ↵	Explore viability and feasibility of shortlisted craft skill 'with' participants(humans) and 'with' resources(more-than-human) available.↵	↵	↵
6.	Visiting other vocational programs being conducted in nearby villages.↵	Field notes, photographs, videography for documentation↵	↵	↵
7.	Planning budget and action plan with sponsors. Seeking necessary approvals.↵	Exhibition of progress work to bring out acknowledgement and appreciation of collective efforts.↵	↵	↵

Table 3 Action Research Planning by author.

OBSERVATIONS:

A group of 45 young women, aged between 16 and 28, took part in the community's first skill training workshop. They identified local resources such as wool, corn husk, Himalayan birch tree bark, and almond hulls as suitable materials to work with. There was an excess of wool due to high local demand which led to the disposal of the surplus quantities. The wool was obtained from nomadic pastoral communities of Bakarwals and Gujjars who migrate seasonally to Kashmir during summer in search of grazing pastures for their sheep and goats. Primarily used as filler for quilted blankets and mattresses; locals also raised sheep and goats for meat, milk, or occasionally for their wool. Historical craft practices were largely forgotten in the community, but inquiries with the elders uncovered a fascinating past. Before the partition of India and Pakistan, both men and women in the village spun wool yarn for knitting and weaving, creating shawls and winter clothing. Additionally, a century-old Namda rug-making tradition (Karolia & Sardiwal, 2014) was discovered in one of the households, serving as a welcome mat for guests. Skilled individuals known as dhunkars still practiced traditional wool carding in the village using hand operated indigenous tool (Fig 3).



Fig. 3. Wool, suitable natural resource deeply rooted in the craft culture of the place, as evidenced by old knitted socks and Namda rugs. The “dhunkar” community hand tools for carding (dhunai).

When studying nearby villages for ongoing vocational courses initiated by local army units, the problem of limited traction due to lack of motivation and reliance on machinery available solely at local army-run community centres surfaced again as a pattern contributing to poor participation and a concerning dropout rate of trainees despite the provision of incentives.

ACTOR-NETWORK FRAMEWORK:

The Actor-Network Theory was used to identify, map, and understand the connections between human and more-than-human actors in the community after the field visit. CMAP tool (The Institute for Human & Machine Cognition (IHMC), n.d.) was used to map the same. The main goal was to gain an analytical understanding of the complex interrelationships among these individuals and entities, as well as unravelling the intricacies of design practice and place-making (Figure 5).

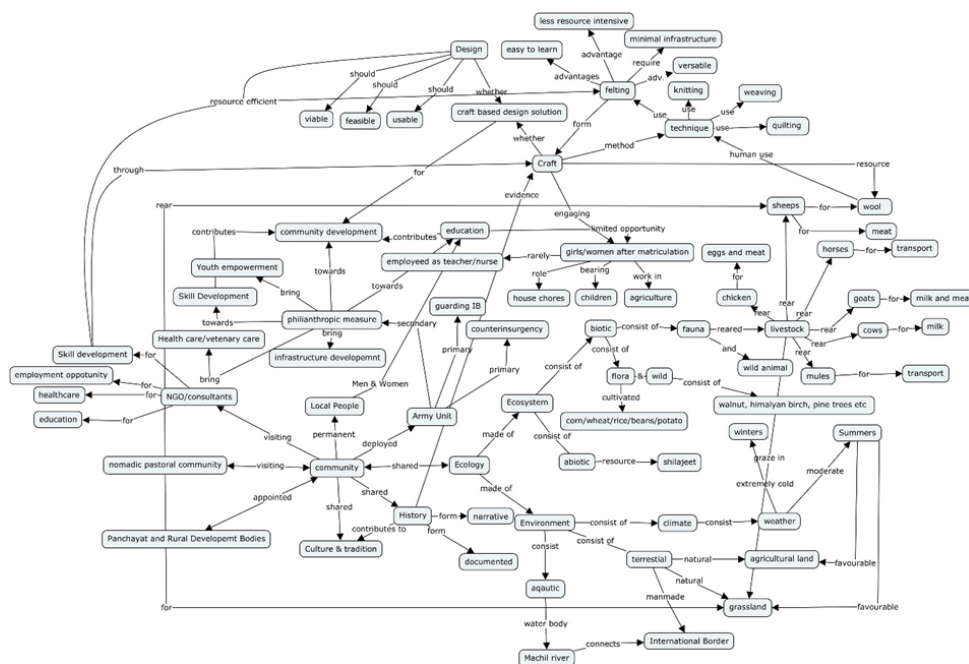


Fig. 5. Actor-Network Theory mapping interconnectedness amidst human/more-than-human actors of the local community (Map developed using CMAP Tool).

WORKSHOP:

After assessment, wool felting was identified as a resource-efficient craft skill to test with because of its historical root within community, material advantage, resource efficiency, ease of learning and reduced dependency on common infrastructure. The training commenced with discussions on the craft role in community development and women empowerment. To prepare, trainees watched video documentaries on women-led textile crafts and engaged in discussions. They were introduced to wool's properties and its applications in crafted products, connecting it to their experiences with harsh winters. To enhance engagement, two hands-on exercises were conducted (Fig 4).

1. Creating wool-felted balls, as part of team building exercise, to develop into a small area rug, representational of the learner's community.
2. Crafting a wool-felted textile swatch in teams to illustrate the process of wet wool felting.



Fig. 4. Hands-on exercise to assess the viability and feasibility of wet wool felting and gauge motivation of participants to learn a textile-based handcraft.

PHASE II

Phase II had two parts: Part (A) occurred before the first snowfall in 2022, and Part (B) took place after the route reopened in June 2023. Building on the success of the first workshop, Phase II primarily focused on exploring namda and other wool-felted product development. This involved both wet and dry felting processes. Collaboration with Mr. Farooq Ahmed, a prominent namda artist from Kashmir, was instrumental in providing training in namda making techniques. Trainees also gained proficiency in resist-felting and needle felting to create seamless products while reducing wool wastage and water usage significantly (Fig 6).



Fig. 6. Exploration with wet-felting and needle-felting to learn traditional and contemporary craft making.

During Part B, hand-operated tools such as carding machines and carding brushes were introduced for product refinement. Facing constraints of funding and resources, a group of ten trainees who expressed keen interest in advancing their craft and demonstrated mastery of the skills taught were encouraged to undergo 'training of trainers'. This initiative aimed to cultivate community members as skilled instructors capable of teaching others.

Additionally, an industry partnership was established with the Grasim group of Aditya Birla to explore innovative applications for fiber waste resulting during yarn spinning, particularly in the form of viscose sliver. Collaborations extended the community's horizons by introducing specialized knowledge and materials to improve crafting techniques and foster innovation (Figure 7).



Fig. 7. Exploring craft products with modern appeal for trainees seeking access to fashionable items. Experimenting with wool and viscose sliver to create accessories and clothing.

REFLECTION

Drawing from the findings of Phases I and II, the author seeks to outline actionable measures taken during these phases using the 'Craft Seeding' framework. This framework is in line with Gandhian philosophy, which emphasizes engaging head, heart, and hand for comprehensive development, as well as post-humanist values that explore connections between human and more-than-human elements. Within the context of post-humanism, this model underscores the significance of heightened human awareness in pursuing ideas of "wholeness" and "co-habitation," despite diminishing human influence. By incorporating design thinking principles, this model extends its relevance beyond human participants. It has significantly impacted decision-making throughout the project by outlining stages undertaken by both researcher-practitioners and community collaborators.

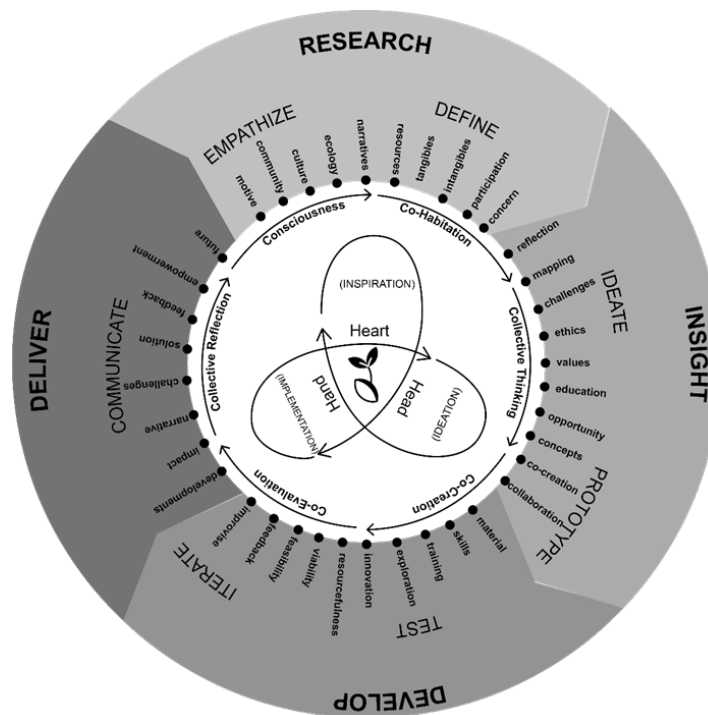


Fig. 8. 'Craft Seeding' framework (author's own)

CONCLUSION

The 'Heart-Felt' Project has completed two phases - 'Craft Diagnostic' and 'Craft-Seeding'. The women trainees responded positively and the craft seeding initiative received acceptance within the community as well. This was evident from their confidence during community exhibitions, their inquisitiveness to learn advance techniques, consistent attendance throughout the workshop duration, requests by new members to be involved. The upcoming phases, 'Craft Nurturing' and 'Craft Pollination', demands meticulous planning and increased community participation, expert involvement, and potential sponsors. The goal is to expedite the process of 'Craft Nurturing' by introducing strategies for commercializing crafted products, ultimately enabling women involved to establish a sustainable means of livelihood. This transition aims to reduce financial dependency on philanthropy and create a self-sustaining entity with its own structural framework that's driven by the community itself.

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