

From Loosely Woven Gauze to Chiffon-like Drape: Craft Innovation at Sarangpur

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to create a symbiosis between the designers and weavers' group to stimulate the development and preservation of a local craft in a sustainable and commercially viable way. Sarangpur is a small town nestled in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Sarangpur is where handloom chiffon, a rare weaving-based craft is produced. The study explores the possibilities of collaborations with designers and artisans to unearth new opportunities for a local craft. These collaborations would then further contribute to innovative products for market sale. The design team has been constantly experimenting and innovating, especially with modern colours, to understand the usability of new color combinations that could be applied to the craft to make the colour palette more interesting. To research the possibilities of a craft and design alliance, a project study was conducted, where local artisans and designers worked together to create new product concepts. As a result of the alliance, five design and marketing concepts were proposed to expand this magnificent craft into contemporary markets. Local craft is a reflection of the relationship between humans and their environment within their historical, cultural, and social contexts. This study proposes a craft and design alliance to form the basis of a new approach for local craft development and an unending process of creating new products. As a result, the knowledge gained through this activity strongly suggests that combining concepts and ideas, embodies or reinvents new designs in craft-based products thus presenting more creative and enticing styles in craft. Designers can play a catalytic role in facilitating the propagation of local craft knowledge into national and international market. This can foster local craft industry and empower artisans to further yield better returns for their own innovations. This paper highlights the value of the alliance between craft and design as a mutual learning mechanism, where both sides can exchange knowledge and enhance their professional capabilities.

Keywords – local weaves, alliance, design concept, redefining culture

INTRODUCTION

Tradition and crafts are reflective of the interaction between history and socio-cultural influences on an environment (Ranjan, 2007). Sarangpur located in Rajgarh district of Madhya Pradesh, was once a popular textile hub with connectivity by road, railway and air, but is now beset with challenges faced by most craft centers. It now stands at a crucial crossroad where a choice has to be made between continuing with the practice of a declining craft and adopting a new means of livelihood. According to Ms. G. V. Rashmi (IAS), Collector, and Managing Director of Mrignayanee, in 1956, the Madhya Pradesh Government ordered the clusters of Sarangpur to weave bandages using loosely woven gauze fabric. In technical terms gauze is a weave structure where the weft yarns are arranged in pairs, crossing before and after each warp yarn keeping the weft firmly in place (Emery, 1966). They developed an ingenious way of using waste material to make medical gauze. Gauze is a thin, translucent fabric with a loose open weave. In 2002, the weavers were introduced to handloom silk chiffon from Bengaluru. The involvement of Madhya Pradesh Hastshilp Evam Hathkargha Vikas Nigam Ltd (MPHSVN) and design inputs from NIFT, the craft of weaving Gauze has evolved into silk chiffon. The demand for modern fabrics and mechanized production system has undermined the charm and tactual sensation of handloom textiles. The diminishing appreciation for crafts as a whole,

induces a domino effect of reduced demand which, in turn, results in compulsion of skilled craftspersons to sell their unique products at mass production prices. With no market demand, the slowdown in the indigenous crafts of Sarangpur necessitates the need for design intervention for its resuscitation.

Attempts have been made to provide organizational support to the handloom weaver families in this area. MPHSVN is working relentlessly to save crafts by providing craftspersons with the looms and raw materials, so that they can continue their practice and earn profits. This study reveals that the key to craft revival is to enable the adaptation of salient characteristics to new products grounded in self-expression. This can be the gateway for the establishment of a new niche market that is appreciative of the value of the craft. The 'Designers Meet Artisans' report (2005) suggests that designers can help to revive local craft settlements by establishing a link between tradition and modernity, thereby meeting the changing market demands.

Objective

- To rejuvenate the dwindling handloom cluster at Sarangpur through facilitation of collaboration between designers and weavers for enhanced popularity and marketability of the craft.
- To encourage the continuation of traditional skills through design intervention

METHODOLOGY

In order to understand and explore the scope of design-craft collaboration, a project was envisioned, planned and undertaken, where weavers and designers worked together to innovate, expand and evolve novel product concepts. Keeping the objectives in mind, the weavers were interviewed to analyze their willingness to incorporate the new designs created by the designers/authors. A field study was conducted through Convenience sampling. 04 weaving units in Sarangpur were located. Through this method researchers choose weavers on the field visit undertaken. The selection of the weavers was conducted among those available and interested to speak about their skill and how their weaving was working well along with their regular household chores. A sample size of 28 skilled weavers was interviewed. The study done through this methodology used questions pertaining to adapting new designs and colors in weaving. The designers identified 07 weavers per unit as per their years of experience. Weavers were selected for this study who had above 8 to 10 years of experience in this area. The design team proposed a conceptual framework on design and on marketing concepts to expand this magnificent craft into contemporary markets.

Sarangpur Cluster

Sarangpur is a quaint village on the northern banks of the Kalisindh river in the Rajgarh district of Madhya Pradesh. Today it boasts of average literacy rate of 74.54 percent for both men and women at 81.79 percent and 66.87 percent respectively. The population of mere 37,345 residents take pride in the diversity and inclusivity of caste and creed. Historically it dates back to the Mughal period under the jurisdiction of prominent rulers such as Baz Bahadur and Rani Rupmati. However, it was during Emperor Akbar's reign that Sarangpur became a victorious bastion for the Mughals (Manohar, 1996). The influence of Mughal patronage is evidenced in the use of both Hindi and Urdu languages and the development of a weaving hub. Another source of income is farming with leaning towards subsistence agriculture. The Rajputs are one of the most influential communities of Sarangpur.

Present Day Scenario

Today handwoven chiffons with luxurious tactility are considered premium quality. The craftspersons, are competent to work with mulberry silk. Weaving is self-sustaining as all processes from degumming of yarn, spinning, setting up of looms and weaving, etc. are undertaken in Sarangpur. Despite these amenities, the region has witnessed a steep decline in the number of people engaged in weaving as a means of livelihood. Approximately 200-250 people were involved in the craft at the initial stage. Now, out of 24 people, only 6-7 are employed in this craft sector; in a single unit there are around 8 looms of which only 2-3 are in functional condition. The average age of these workers is higher than the average age of the population in the area. The

breakage of threads, labour intensive work, and decrease in the amount of work has left the skilled weavers helpless but still hopeful about the revival of the craft and their livelihood. This poses multiple threats to the crafts practices. Firstly, the basic skills of the crafts person slowly weaken with ageing and secondly, their ability and motivation to learn or adapt to new techniques also declines through time. Furthermore, most importantly, the youth who are the future of the region, rarely show inclination towards learning and propagating the craft. The reasons for this lack of interest can be attributed to the overall spread of higher education, lure to the cities for technical jobs and fast development of cities. This increases their awareness about the possibilities of other occupations such as office / corporate jobs, building construction labor or clerical work that provide more remuneration for their time and effort. Government schemes too have fallen short in their implementation and have not motivated the youth to remain in the village and practice their traditional craft practices.



Fig.1 Female weaver from Sarangpur on loom.



Fig.2 Female spinner from Sarangpur completing her daily quota of spinning yarn on her charka

The Road Ahead

With the growing awareness about the value of skill dexterity for handloom weaving, we are witnessing the emergence of niche crafts that are indicative of a promising change in the craft sector. However, it is imperative to address the problems and challenges for craftsmanship to reclaim its position as a career option of choice among the youth. Craftpersons are situated at a critical juncture where the search for innovative craft developments is crucial for them to remain relevant and to survive the competition posed by new technological developments and mass production. This requires the analysis of artisans' needs and market demands that will

steer the design direction. The identification of viable markets can provide assurance of sustained sales. However, the future course can be charted on the premise of current realities.

Swot Analysis:

Strengths: Interventions of the past

Most earlier interventions have been largely government-initiated through MPHSVN. This organization plays the link between the government and the craft cluster. It organizes raw materials, provides know how and avenues for sales of the finished products in markets. The Ministry of Textiles provides support with raw materials and also initiates upgradation programs.

In 1976 the Janta Class Scheme was implemented where the weavers bought raw materials at lower prices and sold their products at lower rates as well, to enter the market and reach a wider range of buyers. The price difference was paid by the government. NIGAM, a commercial cloth scheme that facilitated the availability of raw materials to craftsmen and gave them designer patterns and commercial edge. Hasti Sangam Nigam (HSN) has been providing the weavers with highly twisted silk yarn for the last 15 years along with training programs which has been considerably motivating for them. In 2013 Milan Handloom Cooperative Society (MHCS) was formed in Sarangpur to address the basic necessities of weavers. The MHCS has joined hands with HSN to provide them with raw materials and other amenities.

Opportunity: Amalgamation of Craft and Design

The line separating craft from design is slowly blurring as craftspersons have the ability to make niche products that are demanded by a niche market, and designers are able to make production economically feasible. This poses a challenge for designers to redefine the realm of craft taking into account contemporary aesthetic and functional needs. A group of designers had previously been on this field experience of visiting this cluster to understand the skills, limitations and possibilities of the craft. They returned to the cluster with a plan for the amalgamation of knowledge and skills. Through mutual learning, designers imparted knowledge about trends, emerging markets and sustainability while weavers enabled the designers a chance to learn about traditional methods of executing a craft and explore new techniques. Sharing experiences and techniques is key in the longevity of the craft. This amalgamation was given a formal name of 'Design Intervention' that set the tone in the years to come.

Weakness - Unorganized Crafts

The crafts sector in Sarangpur faced many difficulties. The artisans were unorganized, few people were motivated to be a part of this craft that was on the decline. This was largely attributed to the lack of patronage from previous markets and the failure to identify and entice newer markets. There was a need for the designs to be made relevant in terms of fabric, colour and motifs. However, the true potential of Sarangpur had not been explored. With the flexibility of small-scale production, craftspersons with skills were open to innovation and adaption to newer aesthetics. Raw materials were abundant. The possibility of exports was an avenue to be explored. This study also identified the technical aspects of the fabric such as the grammage of the silk yarn used to weave silk-chiffon which was light weight and without much 'body', which limited its utilization. One of the main reasons that this unique craft is reducing in the numbers of skilled artisans is due to the attraction of modern-city life that is being advertised ever-more-so-often through film, newspapers, influx of modern merchandise into the craft villages, and much more. The older generation are not equipped with knowledge of the new-age consumers and they also lack the interest in changing the designs they have mastered through time. Lack of Government schemes and their usability thereof is adding to the disinterest of the youth and the next generation of the skilled weavers.

Threat: New age Technologies

Sarangpur's region is mainly a village or a rural area of India, where there arises many problems related to continuous electricity, modern gadgets, machinery, etc. In this situation the biggest threat to craft cluster of

Sarangpur is the rapidly growing new age technologies that can produce machine-finished products in plentiful and lesser time. This situation is leading to imitation and cheap products being made and commercialized as handloom products, along with lesser prices. Cheaper products in the market is the main problem seen for the sale and demand of Sarangpur's handloom to lose its value.

Co-creation as a means to an end

Design intervention was established on applying existing knowledge in innovative ways. Through a continuous process of helping the weavers reach their potential by pushing the limits in terms of creativity of the designers. Together undertaken was a co-creation project to rejuvenate the craft of Sarangpur. This meant working with constraints to evolve a common process, where the artisans were an integral part of the design development process. When the craft has been passed on from generation to generation, it is hard to keep sight of the new markets, changing needs and developing aesthetic. This inhibits the appreciation for the craft and the optimum utilization of resources (Kochansky, 2000). Here is where designers then contribute their new ideas and help to further develop the craft without losing sight of it's the key characteristics of the craft.

Strategic approach to Local Craft Development

As suggested in Fig 3 - A Stage wise approach towards development of a craft allows for the birth of a strategy that may be applied to other crafts to generate the same effect (Tung, 2012). Through the process of the project, one was able to lend five design and marketing concepts based on the mutual learning mechanism greatly beneficial to both designers and local craftspeople.

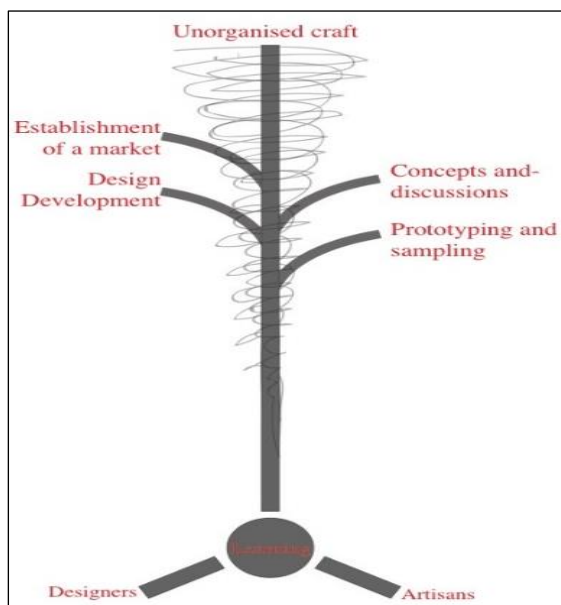


Fig 3 : Tree of Local Craft Development

Based on collaborations if weavers and designers from NIFT, two strategies were proposed, targeting two aspects namely design and marketing (fig. 4 & fig.5). There were in-depth studies conducted that suggested that the core of sustenance of the Sarnagpur weavers will depend on improvement of weaving productivity along with other facilities provided. The main challenge, however, does lie in collaborative work between craft, production, design-innovation and definitely market and consumer behavior. The designer-authors have attempted to create a framework, more like a platform, where traditional knowledge and contemporary design expertise could interact to form interesting concepts.

Design Concepts – focusing on product, material and aesthetic innovation.

Marketing Concepts – focusing on market linkages, business development and economic sustainability.

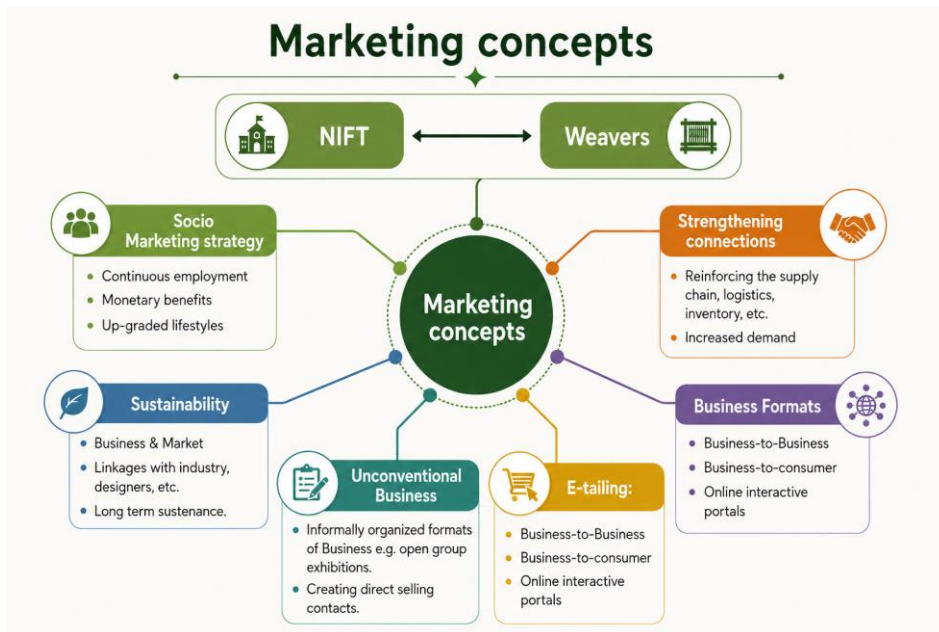


Fig 4 (top)

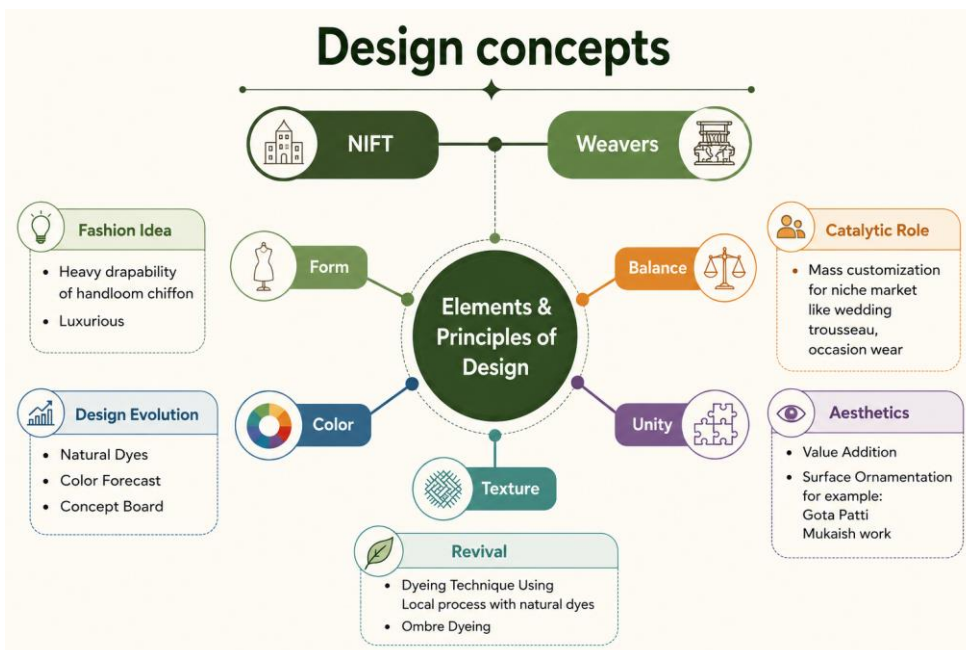


Fig.5

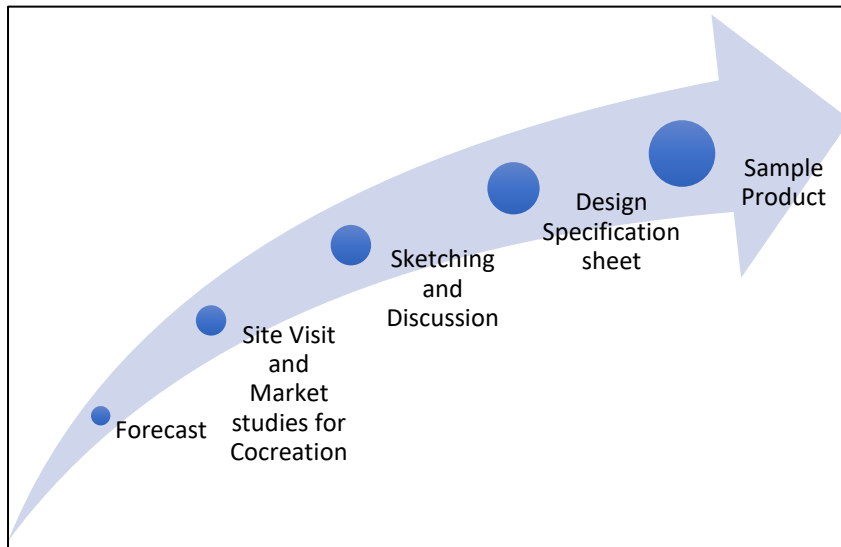
The different design concepts created by the author/designers were leading to new opportunities for ideas of product diversification, new aesthetics and commercial purpose. The marketing concepts were presented to provide mechanisms for connecting these newly designed products to the consumers and markets. The proposed weaver-design alliance were therefore benefitting as an intermediate platform between craft knowledge and contemporary market requirements. Sarangpur proved to be an ideal case for this type of alliance and to be introduced to a dynamic process involving traditional knowledge, value addition and design innovation. This process provided the craft the much-needed cultural identity while retaining its originality and adapting to changing consumer behavior.

Establishment of a Market

The ideal scenario was to identify the demand for the craft from the area in and around Sarangpur in order to minimize the role of middlemen and maximize their profit. Through the project undertaken for this study, the

Rajput community that predates the Mughals and has grown in influence through the years, was identified as the target consumer segment. It was a business strategy that the pivotal role of the Rajput women on the family, can be leveraged to envision a role in the future of Sarangpur.

Chiffon is a woven fabric of premium quality with high drapeability. The design development process incorporated these qualities with the lifestyle requirements of the Rajput women. However, the weight of chiffon had to be increased to add opacity and 'body' before it could be widely adopted. The aesthetic preferences of the prospective target customer and other influencing factors were also integral to the design development process.



(Fig.6) Representation of the stages in Design Development

Forecast

It was important to understand the influence of macro trends in fashion along with its congruence to lifestyle (Fig. 6). This was done to ensure an end product that was in line with the market demand. References to premier forecast publications such as WGSN and Promostyl were tempered with a colour palette suited to the Indian sensibility further strengthened the market alignment of the design.

Response and Discussions - Design Development

Based on prior learning in the Sarangpur cluster, a series of activities were undertaken by designers to develop design concepts for a new product line.

Sarangpur has a weaving community which has an interesting technical knowledge of handloom chiffon weaving. These weavers have shown strong capabilities in areas like loom operation, and setting up the warping set for weaving. However, it was observed that their design sensibilities were rather old-fashioned and not trendy enough to attract the new trends of the contemporary fashion markets.

The findings indicated a gap between **production expertise and design-market knowledge**. While weavers possessed the technical skills required to produce distinctive handloom fabrics, there was limited exposure to changing fashion preferences, colour forecasting, product diversification, value addition and contemporary consumer markets. The cluster therefore demonstrated a need for an intervention that could connect indigenous weaving knowledge with contemporary design thinking and market opportunities. The development process was based on an iterative approach (Fig.7) that combined trend forecasting, sketching, discussions, site visits, market studies, development of design specification sheets and finally, sampling.

Design Phase

Sketching and Discussions

During the design ideation phase, brainstorming by designers was initiated through concept sketches for design development. This process culminated in a cohesive collection of designs. The process was implemented in a cyclic manner (fig.7) where some designs were accepted and others rejected after discussion amongst the team members. The cycle continued with continuous efforts on part of the designers to generate creative design concepts.

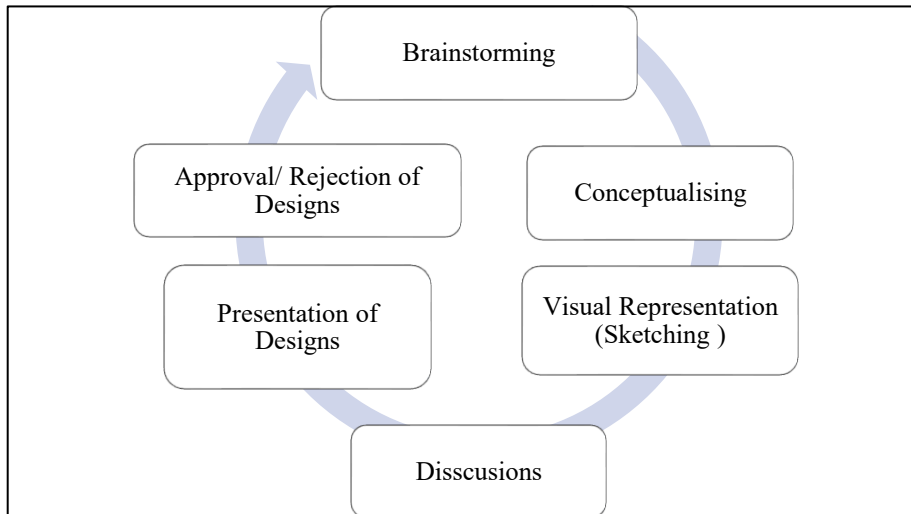


Fig.7: Cyclic Representation of the Conceptualization

Site Visit and Market Studies for Co-creation

Site visits and market surveys were undertaken to assess the existing product range in the area. This was the base on which the designers based their new concepts combined with pre-existing skills of the weavers. The purpose of this collaborative effort of co-creation was to instill confidence among the craftsperson to value their own skills by imparting knowledge to them about the concept of an ideal market. (fig.8).

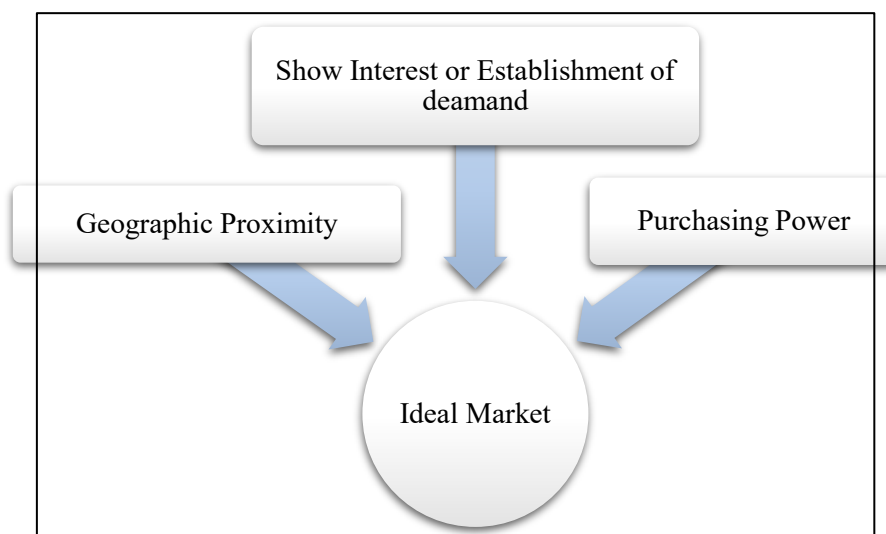


Fig 8: Chart explaining the components required to establish an ideal market

Design and Product Development /Design Specification Sheets

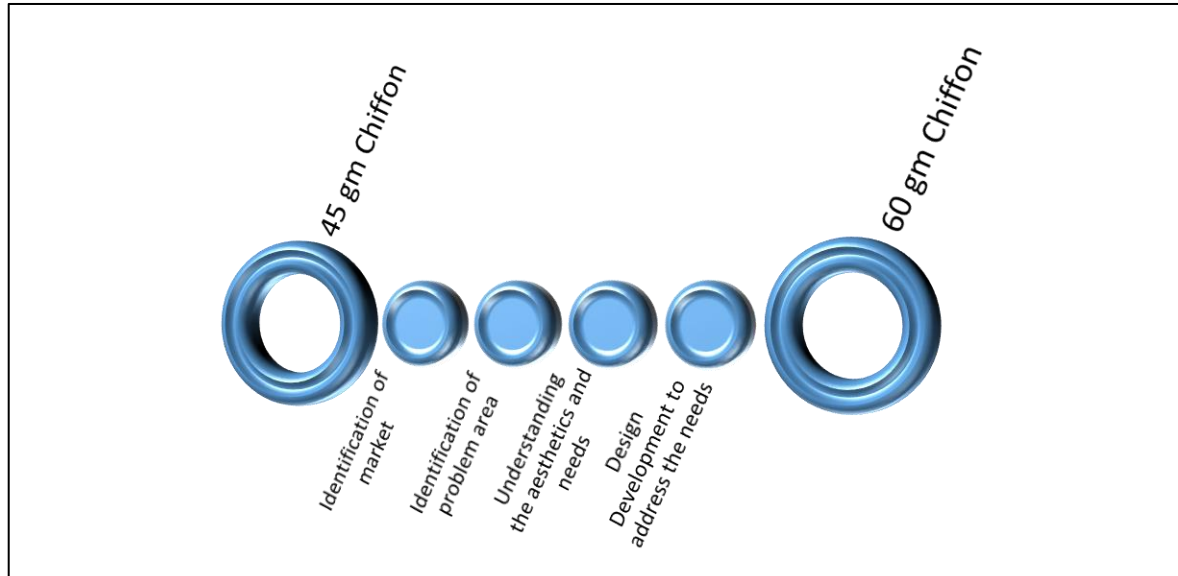


Fig 9: Representation of the method used to increase grammage of chiffon

After the rigorous and systematic process of brainstorming, conceptualization, sketching and discussion, (Fig.7) the chosen designs were formatted in a way that could be easily communicated and comprehended by the weavers. This involved graphic representation of the weave, allotment of pantone colours and inspiration visuals to explain the development process of each design to the weaver. These sheets were made after due deliberation and assessment of possibility of actualization at the craft cluster.

According to the preferences of the market segment of Sarangpur comprising predominantly Rajput women, the lightweight chiffon was given added 'body' by changing the yarn count of the yarn used, chiffon of 60gm with enhanced drapeability was produced. This increased the possibility of its end uses. Vibrant colours were proposed in accordance with the observed preferences of the Rajput women (Fig 9).

Due to the present knowledge level of the artisans, the existing chiffon products lack originality. However, by leveraging the weavers' skills, the new patterns can be introduced on sarees and fabric yardages. Value addition of suggested design options including variations of dyeing, printing, and embroidery that are in tandem with the ethos of the region can be beneficial for the Sarangpur cluster (fig. 10,11,12,13).

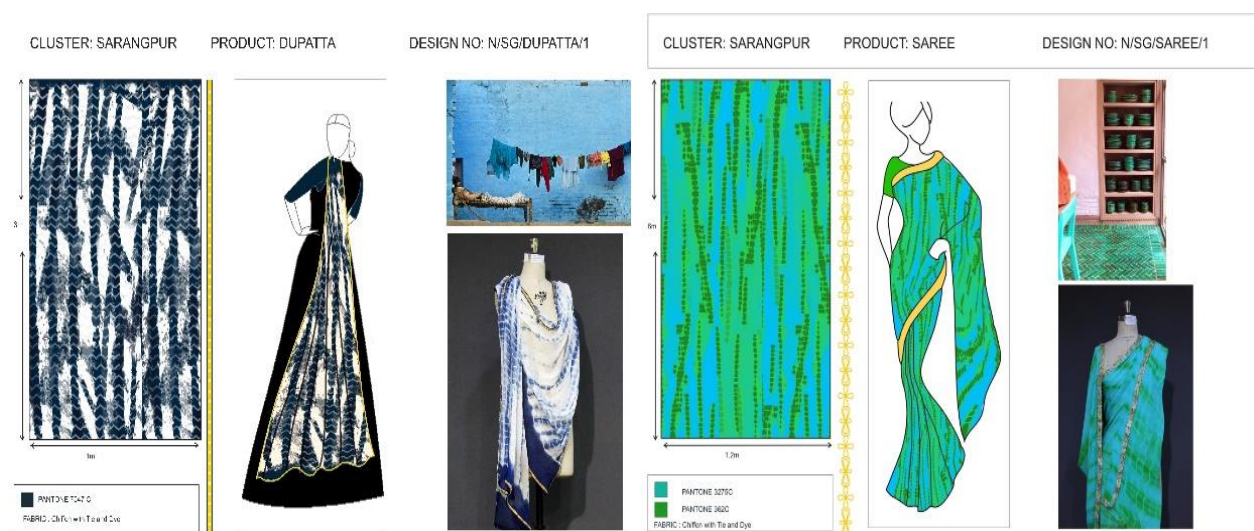


Fig.10,11: Design Sheet along with inspiration and final products



Fig. 12,13: Design Sheet along with inspiration photograph and end product

CONCLUSION

This study uncovers the possibility of the amalgamation of skill, tradition and knowledge. It explores the potential of collaboration between designer and artisan to rejuvenate the dwindling crafts of Sarangpur. The tradition of weaving practiced across generations is applied to make items of traditional clothing such as sarees and dupattas. The learning from this project is that combining the prime characteristics of the craft with design sensitivity for diversification and commercial viability, embodies the essence of craft-influenced design. The study concludes with the acknowledgement of the catalytic role of design in the revival of a craft.

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