

CONDUCTING DESIGN RESEARCH IN PAKISTAN'S CRAFT SECTOR: OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Craft production in Pakistan has many facets, from cheap exploitative mass production to exquisite product lines, highlighting the beauty of the handmade. For my current PhD research, a specific field of practice has been identified: craft projects aiming to develop income generation opportunities for poor craft producers. The development of successful strategies towards including them into craft business value chains long term is the aim of the research, presented in this paper. Aspects of the complex relationship between craft tradition, craft production, poverty alleviation and empowerment inform my topic.

Research methods like a case study investigation are described. My simultaneous role as researcher and field practitioner is discussed as well as challenges and opportunities of an environment that can be described as unpredictable, yet as highly supportive, open and appreciative. Ad hoc chances for research activities and serendipity do not occasionally feed this study, but are enabling it at its core through providing rich and diverse information. This research process I named 'Research by Chance', and its characteristics and requirements for the researcher are outlined in the conclusions. The current research state and the future steps are described in the end.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research is to develop strategies towards including poor craft producers in Pakistan into value chains of craft businesses successfully.

Craft producers are often people in disadvantaged circumstances, with little or no access to basic infrastructure, sanitation, health care, education, financial and legal services, mobility, communication technology and income opportunities. In this paper I use the term BOP (Bottom of Pyramid) producers according to the 'Bottom of Pyramid' concept of C. K. Prahalad and Stuart L. Hart, that describes the four billion people in the world who live in extreme poverty and are excluded from the private business sector, thus have little opportunities to overcome their poverty. While the exact definitions of the BOP concept are continuously discussed, the description seems apt for this research, in which I aim to develop strategies for a successful inclusion of Pakistani BOP producers into craft business value chains.

To link BOP producers' existing craft skills with income generation and empowerment is a regular grassroots development practice of local and international aid organizations in many poor regions (Reijonen) and too in Pakistan. Additionally private businesses with social intentions are interested in craft collaboration, as well as individuals who initiate small-scale production to support BOP producers' livelihoods. Agendas and methods in this patchwork of projects vary as much as their impacts, positive and negative.

Successful examples in this field are for example SEWA and Dastkar in India. SEWA, founded by Ela Bhatt in 1972 is one of the oldest and with almost one million members, largest cooperative of self-employed women in India (Bhatt). Based on SEWA's concept initiatives like SABAH Pakistan across the SAARC region, aim for similar achievements (Khan). Dastkar in New Delhi provides not only an exhibition space for craft producers from across India and Asia but also trains producer groups since more than 30 years (Tyabji). The

brand Fabindia is a successful example of a larger craft business with BOP producers and specialized artisans (Kumra & Mankad; Singh). Reviving a specialized traditional craft can have an empowering effect, as it shows in Noorjehan Bilgrami's Ajrak project (Bilgrami).

During the research process home-based women workers with basic embroidery and stitching skills moved to the centre of interest, because they are often targeted by income generation projects. However other BOP producers are not exempted from the study, and conclusions are drawn from case studies involving male and not home-based BOP producers too.

The central research method is an ongoing analysis of case studies in Pakistan and India, through expert interviews, field visits where possible and project reports when available. Practice based research takes place in form of an ongoing self-initiated project.

TOPIC OUTLINE

Cultural, social, political, economic and infrastructural characteristics of a place impact design research significantly, from the topic definition to the choice of research methods and the conclusions. Formulating the topic has been the result of being involved in craft projects for income generation prior to this research.

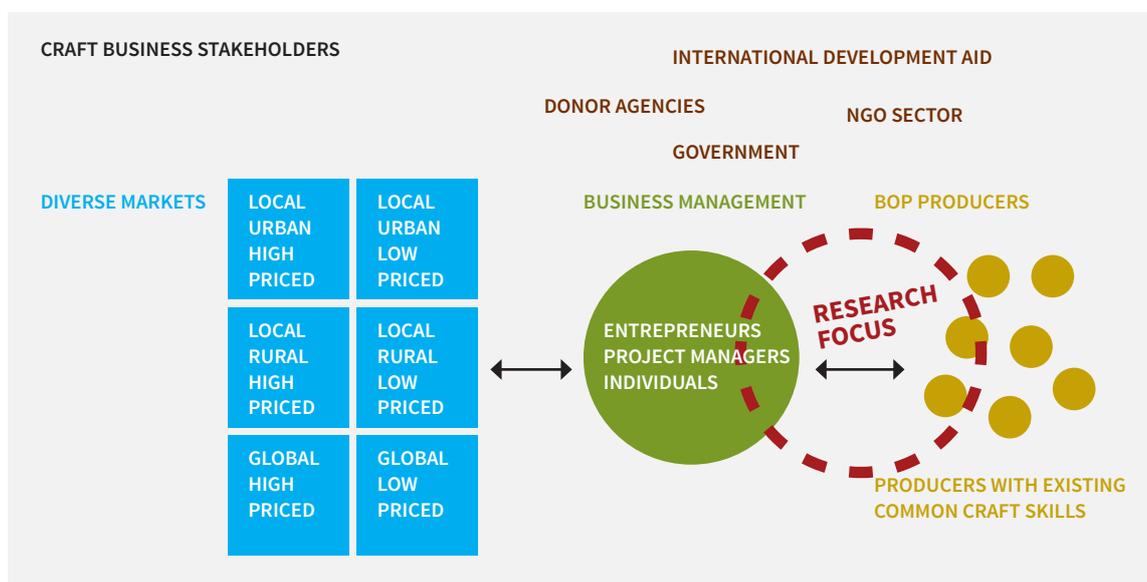
The complex relationship between craft traditions, craft perceptions, craft production modes, poverty alleviation and empowerment informs the topic. In the cultural history of the subcontinent they are closely linked (Imhalsy; Mathur). Craft production for earning everyday living has been an integral part of people's economic system for many centuries. After it was significantly disturbed during colonial rule, Gandhi used craft production and village life as a symbol of South Asian identity to communicate and practice the

demand for economic and administrative independence authentically. This understanding of craft as a vehicle towards social and political change echoes until today in South Asia, especially in India where the cottage industry has a large presence, supported by the government and private businesses. In Pakistan crafts experience less support, though here too I consider this historic understanding an intrinsic conceptual driver behind income generation projects with BOP producers.

Different views can be found regarding this complex relationship. Some critically point out the vulnerability of BOP producers, when they are exploited under the label of cultural heritage preservation (Mathur; Venkatesan; Bonsiepe;). The initiator of a Pakistani craft based label admits that different occupations may offer women a better salary than embroidering for his brand (Farooq). However he also argues that in many circumstances in Pakistan, it is the only realistic immediate opportunity of earning money for BOP producers. The critic voices also point out under which circumstances the relationship can be successful, for example when the organisation within a craft community is supportive (Venkatesan). Some designers support the producers of traditional craft practices, like the Ajrak technique (Bilgrami).

Academic research has been conducted on this complex relationship in different parts of the world. To name some: Palang Wongtanasuporn developed design strategies for village craft producers in Thailand (Wongtanasuporn), Adhi Nugraha investigated questions of traditional crafts in the design context in Indonesia (Nugraha), Satu Miettinen explored the potential of crafts in creative tourism in Namibia (Miettinen), Çiğdem Kaya looked at the role of the designer in craft projects in Turkey (Kaya), and Eeva Katriina Reijonen provides an overview of international practices to support small scale craft production (Reijonen).

Figure 1:
Research focus
within craft
business model



This research focuses on transition scenarios from aid projects to fair business models, which include BOP producers into value chains long term, regularly and with a fair wage. The focus emerged during the case study analysis. A consensus that craft surfaced, that projects should function as self-sustaining businesses, independent from external funding in order to be empowering for BOP producers.

Currently the direct interaction of the BOP producers with their immediate partner in the value chain is emerging at the centre of interest (Fig. 1). In each craft business there are various stakeholders involved. Their relationship and dynamics are complex and not always easy to understand, but impact the BOP producers' situation significantly, for example through irregular market demands or short term engagement. BOP producers often don't have the opportunity to communicate with all stakeholders, also neither the knowledge of the overall value chain, nor the power to influence its management. Their immediate partners are the ones to which they can express ideas and suggestions, wishes and demands. Those immediate partners might be NGO workers, social entrepreneurs, designers, university faculty and students or anyone interested in collaborating with them. Much responsibility lies with those immediate partners to create a successful work relationship with BOP producers as well as the other stakeholders. Exploring this relationship through participatory and reflective activities will be the next research step. Currently a literature review to plan those is ongoing.

It further is important to specify relevant aspect of some thematic fields important my topic:

Craft: The focus lies on craft production for poverty alleviation, not on craft heritage protection, though there might be close connections when reviving a traditional craft results in a larger market demand of a product. The character of the handmade is important, but can be re-interpreted, whatever fulfils the aim of sustaining work and income. One might argue that products without handmade character may fulfil this requirement too, which is a valid point, but not within the scope of this research.

BOP Producers: The ones in focus have mostly common skills, and are usually not artisans specialized in a traditional technique. Priority is given to developing marketable products for and with BOP producers according to their capacity, whether traditional or not, and an infrastructure that provides long term continuous market access, regular wages and opportunities to learn technical and managerial skills.

Empowerment: The term empowerment here is defined as the right and the opportunity to be informed, be aware of options and subsequently the right and ability of choice and action (BMZ, Kilby). To achieve this goal reflective and participatory methods are considered

effective (Chambers, Freire).

Development Aid Practices: Two areas are important for this research: the dynamics created by international donor agencies, who fund income generation through craft projects, and the different methods applied on the grassroots level in direct cooperation with the BOP producers, as observed in the case study analysis.

Fair Business Models: It is understood that a business must be beneficial for all stakeholders, but the main focus lies on the positive impact on the producers, without ignoring the others.

Design Practice: This research suggests an understanding of the design profession that includes strategic design in various areas and stages, such as the initial project planning, the analysis of the current situation, the management of the overall project or business, merchandising and marketing and the direct participatory collaboration with the BOP producers.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The central research method is an ongoing investigation of case studies in Pakistan and India. Varying in scale and structural set-up all case studies share the objective of empowering BOP producers through income opportunity by creating market links. The case studies are divided into four categories according to their organizational formation and background, though the borders between those categories are sometimes fluent:

1. NGOs or government organization programs focusing on different humanitarian, social or legal issues, with a significant craft component
2. Craft based businesses
3. Holistic community projects with a significant craft component
4. Higher education institutions' outreach projects

The case studies were investigated through expert interviews, mostly project initiators, trainers, designers and where possible craft producers. Field visits and observation of trainings were done when possible. The case studies have been investigated with different levels of depth and detail, mostly for logistic reasons. Some have been re-visited several times over a period of four years, with some only one interview was possible. Comparable data could be found regarding indicators such as project management and planning, BOP producer interaction methods, product development, financial dependence / independence from donor, route to market strategies, duration of impact.

One case study has been self-initiated and is treated as an ongoing practice based research approach. It is a collaboration with a group of women in the village, located next to the campus where I teach. Currently

conversations with textile design faculty and the women group take place in order to establish a supportive institutional partnership rather than relying on myself as an individual partner. Scenario workshops are planned, but require further review of possible methods.

Being involved in field practice has not only been the trigger for formulating the topic, but also an enabling factor in accessing highly valuable and diverse data. Falling back on existing contacts helped to identify further experts and stakeholders in the field, case studies and events. This snowball principle was a successful door opener. It has been an important research strategy where consolidated information about craft production for income generation in Pakistan was not available beyond some annual NGO reports and documentations of craft traditions, which were not the main focus.

RESEARCH CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Word of mouth and ad hoc operations had significant impact on the research process. A general culture of spontaneity adds to it. Someone may contact with an interesting hint, a casually discovered product in a bazaar may point at an interesting project, or a resourceful interview partner may suddenly be in town. Sales exhibitions, meetings and discussion rounds usually happen on a short notice with dates, timings and venues changing until the very last minute. Many factors play in: fulfilling deadlines for donors whether a project is completed or not, re-occurring infrastructural problems from transportation issues – flights, road blockages, fuel shortages – to a lack of electricity or sudden shut downs of cities for security reasons. A research trip to the Northern Areas had to be delayed for one year for security rules.

BOP producers are unfamiliar with academic research. Getting consent agreements for data usage signed, required simplified explanations regarding the nature and ethics of this research.

In the practice based research I faced other issues: Especially female BOP producers may or may not get permission from their husbands until shortly before an activity to join. Unexpected necessities occur: a session to interview 17 BOP producers individually, planned well ahead, assistants organised and briefed, and the technical and special set up completed, had to be cancelled on the spot when the participants did not arrive, because all of a sudden they had to help out in the rice harvest of their village. While tempted to start with the three women who had come, it was essential to not unveil the questions to them. They would have travelled through the village and influenced the answers of the other 14 participants. Instead the interviews were held one week later successfully.

Attitudes resulting from operating in an environment dominated by development practices and conventions

impacted the research progress but provided interesting insights too. BOP producers like many poor people, have not much faith in any positive change promised to them, nor the idea that they could participate actively in it. An enlightening anecdote happened in the self-initiated project. Over a period of two years we focused on developing products based on the women's stitching and embroidery skills. Material was provided in sufficient quantity but significantly less was utilized in the products. After a few discussions it turned out that the material had been stolen. After the project was discontinued the women requested through a university assistant, who lives in the village, to continue. When asked to find out first why the fabric was stolen, the reply was interesting: the women, who had no prior experience with NGO projects themselves, had heard that one can get material or tools like a sewing machine out of such projects. This story sheds light on the reputation of development projects: It is a widespread notion in disadvantaged communities, that NGO projects are short lived and one should try to get whatever one can out of them in that short project period. The idea of positive long term impact through self-ownership and responsibility has been jeopardised by an environment, characterized by false promises, disappointments and subjection to charity. As a result there is little trust in any initiative.

A culture of exchange is another challenge: often some immediate favour in return for sharing information is expected: a free consultancy or placing an order for products. I often have to decide what would be reasonable to give, and if it is not in conflict with a neutral research position or with time and financial capacity. No money is given. Products are sometimes purchased when liked, never out of pity. Casual feedback is given honestly, but no free professional consultancies. While tackling this culture of exchange was challenging, it signalizes the acknowledgement of the research and a potential interest in participating in possible future research activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Research by Chance

The research approach shaped by the Pakistani environment I have termed 'Research by Chance'. What may sound discrediting, even considering more organic research methods like the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss), can actually lead to data gaining depth, authenticity and complexity.

The biggest challenge of 'Research by Chance' is to avoid convenience research and collect data simply because they occur. The risk lies in organizing the research around these chances, instead of making conscious efforts to find research aim relevant information. On the other hand unexpected opportunities

can provide important data, open up new dimensions and influence the direction of the research meaningfully. Characteristics of ‘Research by Chance’ are:

- Data collection largely through being involved, mingling in the field, hearsay, word of mouth and stumbling upon hints
- Data of diverse, multi-dimensional and complex character and scale, thus difficult to compare
- Large amounts of data, irrelevant and important
- Research plan difficult to follow rigidly with opportunities appearing or dropping suddenly

‘Research by Chance’ can provide interesting data but it implies certain requirements for the researcher to follow:

- Be spontaneous: if a chance occurs, be ready, re-arrange plans, have equipment easily available
- Reflect and consciously decide about accepting or rejecting information – e.g. a mentioned case study – based on its potential plus value to the research
- Leave flexibility for unexpected interesting aspects
- Develop fairly clear categories, through which the multi-dimensional data can be organized
- Always have a plan A, plan B and plan C ready
- Try to understand the dynamics of the environment, even if fragile and unpredictable
- Build trustworthy relationships

In this research, thematic categories were defined, and filled with multi-faceted perspectives in order generate new insights and theories (Fig. 2): the more diverse, the more saturated at category would be considered. The more saturated the less important it would be to look at case studies which most likely would repeat certain insights.

‘Research by Chance’ impacted this research significantly. The unexpected variety of data and perspectives directed the focus without changing the initial goal of including BOP producers into craft business value chains.

As a result the initial goal of developing guidelines for businesses with BOP producers felt too prescriptive. Each project’s and each BOP producer group’s situation differs on many levels such as organisation, financial situation, scale, project partners, education and exposure, design sensibility, craft skill, mobility, access to resources, social constraints and group dynamics. Therefore it seems more important to develop and apply reflective tools that enable BOP producers and their partners to assess their situation. Based on this awareness of their strength and weaknesses, strategies for successful market access and income generation can be developed collaboratively.

To find out how this can be achieved practically is the current state of this research.



Figure 2:
 Diagram showing how categories get saturated

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