

## Article No.5

# DHABLA AND SHAWLS OF KUTCH: PRESERVING IDENTITY THROUGH GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION

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**Abstract:** *This case is based on artisans of the traditional craft of Kutch Dhabla and Shawl weaving and how they achieved the GI status. This case highlights the GI registration process in detail with example of Kutch Shawl in focus. The narrative unfolds with a textile student Michele meeting Meghji Bhai, a renowned artisan who is exhibiting at Rann Utsav. The study presents the challenges faced by the craft including cheap knockoffs which is posing threat to a craft which has a long history of more than 500 years. The study details the process and hassles faced by the weavers community to obtain the Geographical Indication (GI). Further in the case the benefits of being accorded with the GI status have been discussed which include protection of the cultural identity of the craft which has further helped the community in fetching premium price of the products. The case study also brings out the fact that earlier the craft had reduced to almost extinction but several weavers have started re- practicing the craft bringing huge increase in number of weavers . Currently, these beautifully woven products are being sold through numerous online and brick- and- mortar platforms.*

**Keywords :** *Geographical Indication, Craft, Marketing, Kutch Shawl, Dhabla*

## Background

**‘Kutch located in western part of the India is known as ocean of handicrafts’.**

Michelle, who was perusing graduation in textile design from a reputed institute in Canada, had heard these words from her textile professor. She was recalling those lectures while moving towards the location of Rann Utsav after landing to Ahmedabad airport. Walking into the memory lane of those sessions of textile heritage of India she was about to enter Bhuj. “Madam.. here is your destination, we have reached Rann Utsav”, said the cab driver in a loud voice;. She didn’t realize when she fell asleep. She got off the vehicle and started taking a look at different stalls in the exhibition on the site of Rann Utsav. Craftsmen had exhibited a variety of crafts including *Ajrakh, Bandhani, Copper Metal Bells, Kutch Embroidery, Laquer work, Leather craft*, etc. She stopped at the Woolen shawls counter and started taking a look at the merchandise. Mesmerized by the magnificent geometric patterns and mirrors on these shawls, Michelle came across the logo of Geographical Indication. “Why this logo?” she curiously inquired. “This logo suggests that our craft is protected under GI. A Geographical Indication (GI) is a sign or

symbol which is used on products that have a specific geographical origin [WIPO, 2021]<sup>1</sup>and it helps us protect our craft from counterfeit products .These are authentic hand-woven shawls from Kutch and their history goes back to more than five hundred years and hence we hold a GI status for our craft.” –Meghji bhai told her. Michelle quickly correlated the history of this omnipotent craft which she had read in her craft sessions. She recalled the stories of origin of craft in the Kutch region. One fable narrated that a *Rabari* girl was given a weaver as a dowry, who came along in Kutch from Rajasthan [Times of India, 2012]<sup>2</sup>. Gradually as generations passed, his family grew and weaver community settlement in Kutch took place. Another fable stated that ‘*Ramdev Pir*’ once visited Narayn Sarovar for pilgrimage, his followers built a temple for him and requested him to invite his kins from Rajasthan to take care of the temple. This immigration and settlement brought the weaving of shawls in the Kutch. Meghji bhai explained about the craft, “These woven shawls and *Dhablas* were originally adorned by Gadhvi, Ahir and Rabari communities. This Geographical indication logo is allocated to only those products which have a specific geographic origin and these shawls possess a unique style of weaving which is indigenous to Kutch”.

### **Craft & the processes**

Meghji bhai gauged her curiousness and invited her to visit his native place Bhujodi, a home to woven splendor of Kutch. After enjoying the beauty of Rann Utsav , next day Michelle decided to drop into the village. Based on the directions given by Meghji bhai and after having inquired the localites, she finally reached her terminus.

Carrying forward the previous days discussion, she tried to get into the details of the production process. Enthusiastically Meghji bhai explained the production process, “Earlier sheep and goat wool was procured from nomadic communities known as Rabaris and Bharwads- whose occupation was cattle herding. Purification and processing of fibers were followed by spinning of yarns by hand. Those yarns were then dyed with colours including red, green and yellow, which were obtained out of natural dyeing sources. Once dyeing was over, preparation of warp and weft was done, colloquially termed as tana and bana. He directed Michelle to the neighboring house to demonstrate the process of preparation of warp and weft as the process was not undergoing currently in his workshop.

### **The Technique**

Both of them returned to Meghji Bhai’s workshop, Meghji bhai explained her about the weaving through loom in detail; he very patiently wove on his pit loom which was more than 50 years old foot over paddle equipment. As he wove and inserted the yarn to introduce the motif, Michelle could quickly relate to a weaving term she learnt during her study, she exclaimed “Oh this is tapestry technique [Anjali, 2019]<sup>3</sup>of inserting design!” “Yes”,Meghji bhai nodded with a smile on his face. Michelle’s inquisitiveness lead her to probe into the details of motifs.Meghji bhai directed her to the room where a loom was kept. Meghji bhai explained, “We weave what we see. It means the motifs are inspired from the surrounding flora fauna and daily objects. However, majorly they are stylized or abstract.” Further he presented some examples of motifs in the ready products. He

elaborated further, “The core motifs are *satkhadi*, *lath*, *jaad* and *chaumukh*. *Satkhadi* is a diamond shaped motifs surrounded by minute dots[Chaand, Yadav, Sachan, & Tewari, 2011]<sup>4</sup>. The name *satkhadi* indicates the number of shaft lifting required to create a motif. *Lath* is symbolic to stick, whereas *jaad* depicts tree and *chumukh* is inspired by four faced lamp”. Delighted Michelle smiled and nodded. Meghji bhai added, “The same motifs may be differently named in other villages”. “That is interesting to know”, Michelle said. Meghji bhai further explained to her that since past few years in order to provide variety to the clients’ new motifs had been explored but source of inspiration remained the same. Admiring communities’ receptiveness, sense of consumer’s taste as well as willingness to offer fresh elements she requested him to explain more about contemporary motifs. Some of the newer motifs included leaf, scorpion, camel, butterfly, snake, human figures and variations of *Chaumukh*.

### **Marketing Mix**

Michelle further visited the workshops of various weavers to develop an understanding about the product options available. The *Dhabla* was available in various traditional motifs based on daily life of the weavers - mostly geometrical motifs. Michelle was informed by local weavers that *Dhablas* with traditional motifs were specially woven for the local *Rabari* Community. However with changing times using contemporary motifs, *jaal* and different patterning techniques had started gaining popularity.

The price of the *Dhablas* varied from INR 3000-15000 and the traditional *Dhablas* were more expensive than the contemporized versions due to more motif intensive designs. These products were being sold through both online and brick-and-mortar channels[Levy, Weitz, & Watson, 2014]<sup>5</sup>. The popular online portals included India Mart, Amazon, iTokri, Kutch Culture, Flipkart, Gaatha etc. and offline stores included Gurjari, Prijam Handicraft, New Vastra kala, Kaushani designs, Bhujodi, etc. However the distribution of traditional *Dhablas* was limited and was being used by very selected client base which was probably due to the fact that these products were entirely handmade and took a lot of time to weave. Meghji Bhai started showing the collection produced by him to Michelle and stated, “These are the more contemporized versions of *Dhablo* and are more popular. Earlier we used to make traditional *Dhablas* which were very thick and could be used only for selected purposes. But looking at consumer preferences we have evolved and have started using lighter cotton fabrics including Kala cotton which is also one of Kutch’s exquisite craft.” Michele inquired, “Meghji Bhai, what do you do to promote your craft ? Do you run advertisements?” Meghji Bhai replied, “We do not go for advertisements but there is lot of online and print coverage regarding our craft which helps us in connecting with our customers[Kotler & Armstrong, 2012]<sup>6</sup>. There are articles written by various craft researchers and social media also helps us. Exhibitions helps us in a huge way in connecting to our buyers, especially with respect to exports.”

### **Need for GI status**

Looking at the beautiful designs created by Meghji Bhai, Michelle further queried regarding the need of GI. Meghji Bhai told Michelle that over a period of time he had

realized that a lot of Shawls from other states was being sold to the customers in the name of Kutch Shawls which was a huge challenge in front of the weavers. This technique of weaving was more than five hundred years old and over the years the craft kept evolving. But gradually a number of copycats started taking over the market which was a threat to the craft and the artisans of the community. Meghji Bhai stated thoughtfully, “We have realized that this scenario was not only posing a threat to the craft’s identity but also posing a threat to the weavers’ economic conditions. We were losing money and also our cultural identity. Many tourists are cheated by these knock offs of the Kutch Shawl. We had to protect our tradition in order to sustain which is why we filed for GI in first place”.

### **Process of GI application**

“I am very impressed by your knowledge about GI, Meghji Bhai. So how did you go about it? What is the process of registering for a GI?”, Michelle enquired. Meghji Bhai started explaining the process in detail, “We had to first fill in the application form in triplicate, along with map copies of our region. Since the GI application was made on the behalf of the entire artisan community, the registration was applied through a weavers association. Proofs were also submitted in form of old pictures of the community wearing *Dhablas*, their old samples as old as 500 years, etc. to establish the fact that the craft was being practiced in the region since a long period of time.” Michelle further questioned, “But Meghji Bhai, what were the steps you had to follow to get the GI registration?” Meghji Bhai said, “First we had filed our application on an individual basis which was rejected because in order to file a GI, the artisan practicing the craft should be a part of an organization which will be treated as the applicant body. The officer explained the reason of rejection stating that GI is granted to the artisan community and not to individual artisans. After this we filed our application through artisans’ association. One has to provide the proof of location in which they are residing, along with the number of years of residence (Proof of residence of the weavers) and the craft for which GI is applied. Also old photographs of the community adorning the craft along with samples were required. After submission of the application, a preliminary scrutiny and examination was conducted to check the application for any deficiencies. If there are any queries from the concerned officials then we are given time of a month to remedy the same. Our application was then examined by a consultative group of experts who issued their examination report about our case. Since the registrar did not raise any objection to our application it straight away went for publication in the Geographical Indication journal. Within three months, as there were no objections to our application from anyone, we obtained our GI registration.” Michelle asked, “What if somebody had raised objections to your application?” Meghji Bhai replied, “In that case the registrar would serve a copy of the notice to the applicant and within two months the applicant has to reply with a counter statement. If this is not done, the application is considered invalid. Where the counter-statement has been filed, the registrar shall serve a copy to the person giving the notice of opposition. Thereafter, both sides will lead their respective evidences by way of affidavit and supporting documents and a date for hearing of the case is fixed thereafter. It took us almost two years to get the GI as we were not aware regarding the documentation process. We will also have to file for renewal of G.I. after ten

years[DPIIT:GOI, 2020]<sup>7</sup>. Since we received GI Status in the year 2012, we will have to file for renewal in 2022. It is to be noted that the Geographical Indication is on the weaving technique and not the material. ”

### **Implications of updated status**

Michelle started pondering on the implications of GI implementation. She asked Meghji Bhai regarding the benefits of implementation of GI to which he replied, “There is a big challenge which we are facing from Ludhiana shawls who sell their products as Kutch Shawls in various exhibitions. A fool proof system of inspection by a panel of craft experts and master artisans should be constituted to keep the system in check. I had once experienced in an exhibition that seller’s license was cancelled and he had to vacate his stall on the charge of selling fake products in the name of handicrafts. Once we had put up a hoarding stating beware of Knock offs in an exhibition to generate awareness. The government should also run awareness campaigns to beat the effect of these knock-offs. This can include putting up hoardings at public places such as airport, railway stations etc. and distribution of relevant literature through government offices.”

Continuing the conversation Michelle further inquired, “What other impact has this GI had on the craft and the artisans in your opinion?” Meghji Bhai stopped for a while after listening to this question and started speaking seriously, “I must also tell you that the number of Kutch artisans had been declining considerably before GI status was conferred upon us. Due to threat posed by Ludhiana Shawls the number of artisans had gone down from 4000 to almost extinction but gradually, we are seeing an increase in the number of artisans practicing this craft. In general an artisan is able to generate an income of INR 70000-80000 on yearly basis. There is an increase in orders and the opportunities have improved considerably. I would also attribute some of this success to Khamir’s efforts. They have actually helped us a lot in introducing our product in different material called Kala cotton. Through the successful intervention and incorporation of Kala cotton we are now able to offer products such as sarees, stoles and dupattas, which havewidened the product range as well as increased the earning.”

### **Conclusion**

Michelle while, concluding the talk said, “So process of GI Registration indeed was a milestone for all the Kutch Shawl weavers”. Meghji bhai nodded and replied, “Yes, the competition from Ludhiana Shawls was leading to a decline in the number of Kutch Shawl weavers and posing a threat to the identity of the craft. The weavers have gone through the lengthy process of obtaining the GI registration and it helped the weavers in multiple ways including creating a niche for Kutch Shawl weavers and curbing unnecessary competition. Post the GI Tag Kutch shawls have increasingly gained importance in both domestic and export market. In addition, a huge surge has been observed in the exports of these shawls to the US and European markets. The Kutch shawls currently retail through multichannel model [Knights & Mason, 2019] as their presence ranges from physical stores, exhibitions to e-commerce, social commerce and mobile commerce. Overall, GI has helped us in differentiating our products from other

cheap products in the market and build a reputation which fetches us premium price. It helps us in export earning, promotion of tourism and preserving our cultural identity. Since we now have legal protection through GI it has helped protect our livelihood and promote employment in the weavers' community. I would say that still we need to go long way with the help of government". With this Michelle concluded her trip to Meghji bhai's weaving workshop in Bhujodi. She pondered upon the future of the craft and the newly acquired knowledge about GI. She was deeply impressed by Meghji Bhai's hospitality and started compiling and analyzing the data and details shared by the artisans of Bhujodi.

### Assignment questions

1. What steps must be taken to fortify the benefits of Geographical Indication tag in addition to the suggestions given by Meghji Bhai?
2. What steps can be taken to widen clientele in terms of product diversification and marketing mix for preservation and upliftment of the craft ?

### References

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Annexure 1: Motifs of Kutch Shawl & Dhablas



Top left  
*Satbhadi*- to make this design warp is lifted seven times

Top right  
*Chaumukb* (inspired from 4 faced lamp)

Bottom left  
*Jaad*

Bottom right  
Variation of *Chaumukb*

Source: Chaand, A., Yadav, A., Sachan, K., & Tewari, N. (2011). Shawls and Dhurries of Kutch. Gandhinagar: National Institute of Fashion Technology.

## Annexure 2: The process of GI Registration

STEP 1 : Filing of application (3copies) alongwith required documents, samples , photographs and map of the region.



1.STEP 2 : Preliminary scrutiny and examination by government authorities and rejection of application on the basis of applicants not being members of Weavers Association



STEP 3: Re-filing of application through Artisan's Association alongwith proof of residence and the history of the craft being practiced since a considerable duration of time.



1.STEP 4: Raising of queries by government officials regarding the application and reply from Artisan's Association within the stipulated duration of one month



STEP 5: Forwarding of the application to consultative group of experts for examination and report preparation . No objections raised by the registrar.



1.STEP 6: Publication in the Geographical Indications Journal



1.STEP 7: No Opposition to Registration within the specified time period of 3 months



1.STEP 8: Registration of GI for Kutch Shawls