

Name: **Meera Velayudhan**
Department: POLICY ANALYSIS (Gender & Culture)
Institution: Centre For Environment & Social Concerns (CESC)
Country: India

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Title: **Pluralist Traditions, Craft Communities and Development Initiatives in Kachchh (Gujarat, western India)**

Abstract:

Kachchh (also called Kutch), a princely state until 1948, administratively joining Gujarat in the 1960s, extending over an area of 45,612 km, is the largest district in the state of Gujarat and the second largest district of India after Leh. A large part of this district known as Rann of Kutch is shallow wet-land which submerges in water during the rainy season and becomes dry during other seasons. Located in an arid ecological zone, with large tracts of uncultivable and uninhabitable land, Kachchh is almost 24% desert and 73% of the total area is wasteland with low levels of productivity. A region with diverse communities with historical linkages with different regions and cultures (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central and West Asia, Northern India, Northern Africa), Kutch society is a mosaic of varied religions, sects, ethnic groups, castes and sub-castes and also bifurcations (Muslim and Hindu branches) in the lineage of some communities. The historical links of Kachchh with Sindh (migration between Sindh and Kachchh was a regular feature through its history) known for its Sufi saints, gave a strong Pir tradition to Kachchh. Sufi traditions and forms of Goddess worship fostered an inclusive religiosity, giving Kachchh an unusual history. The non -discriminatory practices of the rulers of the princely state, the diverse composition of the bureaucracy, army, etc gave Kachchh a distinct political and cultural identity. The diverse communities are craft communities in some form or the other, each community having its distinct tradition and the rich craft used in day to day use and village level consumption. Craft is also the common link between communities. For example, the Khatri (Muslim) Ajrakh cloth block printers have a settled clientele or traditional customers, the pastoralists-Maldharis-who bought the Ajrakh cloth to make their clothing which was distinct and a marker of their community identity and the natural dye and indigo used giving a coolness to the cloth. Ajrakh cloth was also used by other communities for occasions such as marriages, birth, etc. For women of some communities, fabrics were produced that signified social and marital status. For centuries Lohar (Muslim) metal bell makers made bells for cattle herders (Hindu) and to date Meghwal(dalit) weavers make scarves sub-castes (Hindu) such as Rabaris and Ahirs. Women's embroidery used in day to day life, communicated status, personality, the diverse styles signifying the identity of the community, sub-community, status within the community and have evolved with times. Crafts thus

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formed the basis of cultural mobility and exchange where labor, design, art, craft are integrated and are a part of the local social system. Narratives suggest that the relative environment of mutual tolerance that prevails in Kachchh today, as distinct from the rest of Gujarat, is rooted in the long history of participating in each other's religious and social ceremonies and festivals, making them familiar with each other's customs, with artisans offering free gifts to religious groups during festivals, a history and understanding that prevails in varying degrees today. Lacking a written script, craft is thus the 'written' language expressing specific identities, weaving together diverse identities- lives and livelihoods- into a self- esteem expressed in the Kachchhi word KHAMIR (intrinsic pride) and KACHCHHIYAT, the ethos of the larger Kachchhi community that prevails to date.

Traditional livelihoods have come under environmental, political and market pressures, with fast paced industrialization of the district, particularly after the 2001 earthquake and the commercialization of the coast. Located in an earthquake zone, the massive earthquake led to heavy loss of lives and widespread destruction, the impact on craft livelihoods was devastating. The non-embroidery artisans were the most affected, losing their meagre asset bases- worksheds, tools, equipment and the local market. Craft communities not only confronted quake related losses and erratic rehabilitation response by the state government but also were increasingly exposed to a buoyant national economy, increased access to information and communication, through a range of civil society organizations and institutions, particularly in the post 2001 earthquake phase. For traditional craft communities coming to terms with economic restructuring and modernity, anxieties about loss of cultural identity and economic insecurities combine. Focusing on economic interventions, issues of equity and governance- civil society organizations and institutions have begun to move out of their uneasiness in addressing cultural and religious domains of the lives of communities. Narratives suggest that whether in organizing producer groups, including women's collectives, or setting up a common facility in a resource scarce region, civil society organizations admit that they have had to respond to such challenges, although not as a well thought out approach or vision in development action. Even as traditional forms of inter- cultural exchange such as local fairs where diverse communities participate and yet maintain their community identity persist, fast paced modernization, in particular the changing market, including the land market leading to loss of livelihoods and migration of communities, are impacting modes of social interaction & living traditions of craft communities. Based in oral histories and narratives, apart from historical evidence, this paper will focus on the changing market, varied levels of discourses involving select artisans, producer groups, civil society organizations/institutions such as NGOs, the contests involved and the nature of shared cultural spaces created in Kachchh. This paper is based on the author's ongoing 2 year research study ' Craft Communities, Local Natural Resources and Changing Market-' a study of two craft communities in Kachchh, Gujarat (western India).

Keywords: Pluralist Traditions, Craft Communities, Development Action, Changing Market

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