

# Enforced distance as catalyst and creative disruptor of heritage narrations. Caring for people, culture and planet through inclusive storytelling

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## Abstract

Concerns about stubbornly prevailing systems of design production and consumption that negatively impact people and planet have never been more prominent than during the past two decades, with a marked increase in industry, consumer and academic interest in narratives (if not necessarily action) around sustainable design practices laying claim to handling the environment with care. On a similar trajectory, but surprisingly infrequently connected, academic and institutional endeavours to give voice to makers and their culture in the wake of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>)

Cumulus Antwerp 2023's paper track *'Handle with care'* is a welcome platform to report on a project that connected these two pressing challenges of the 21st century, to elevate care in design beyond its human (and planetary) focus. This paper shares insights from a funded research project that allowed academics, technical specialists and makers in Scotland and India to consider digital entrepreneurship opportunities around heritage to benefit environments, makers, users and craft practices. The 'Covid lockdown impact on craft capacity' (CLICC) project started at the height of the COVID 19 disruption to supply chains and travel and explored how new realities around digital engagement could shock a languishing sustainability agenda into the mainstream of production, consumption and protection of heritage crafts, therein exploring how *technology, culture and design might be harnessed in a way that embodies kindness and concern for people, for objects and for the planet*. The team used an inclusive ethnological approach by enlisting potential consumers to shape broad content parameters for what digital making narratives might constitute and who the target audience might be, before employing artisans to produce moving image pilots around their craft. It brought together stakeholders in NGOs, academia and cultural industries to use design thinking and co-design practices to determine hardware, technical skills and content guidance needs if digitisation of intangible heritage were to help realise an inclusive preferred future of making. The emphasis was on futures for everyone and everywhere, with design in a pivotal role to help take care

of past objects and practices as well as meeting future production and consumer demands; a multi-lingual production guide for filming heritage processes now exists as a free and highly visual resource to reach many artisan communities. The project tested digital technologies to enable direct collaborations between makers and consumers at a distance, through circular design paradigms, and for an evolution of practice that is dedicated to simultaneous care for human, planetary and cultural resources. By sharing our findings we seek dialogue with the CUMULUS crowd to formulate new agendas that further advance truly inclusive co-design practices towards sustainability, *acknowledging the fact that our natural environment (...) and cultural inspirations and practices are forced to adapt to current and future global challenges, with heritage having an untapped potential to being a guiding resource in this transformation*.

## Author keywords

Inclusive co-design; digital engagement; heritage informed circular making; care for culture and people and planet. Enforced distance as catalyst and creative disruptor of heritage narrations

## The differing motivations for provenance narratives

Mounting ethical and environmental concerns about the prevailing systems of consumer goods production (e.g. Payne 2019) have led to ever increasing purchaser (and of course marketing) interest in provenance narratives, and since the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage origin accounts and certifications have frequently been enlisted to help protect maker communities against cultural loss and misuse. The respective motivations behind such narratives are expressing care for potentially conflicting actors, with the former arguably focused on engaging (or informing) consumers, aide business or make it more ethical, and the latter attempting to safeguard culture or afford a competitive advantage to makers. The 'Covid lockdown impact on craft capacity' (CLICC) project harnessed COVID 19 disruption to supply chains and travel to explore how new



realities around digital engagement could shock a languishing sustainability agenda into the mainstream of production, consumption and protection of heritage crafts, therein exploring how *technology, culture and design might be harnessed in a way that embodies kindness and concern for everyone, for objects and for the planet.*

### **Adaptation to online living - virtual consumption and a new appetite for visual narration, but not inclusively**

As high streets across the world were shuttered and more than half of all workers in the UK arts and entertainment industries were on furlough by the end of the year, members of societies where economic support for pandemic-stricken sectors was strong are reported to have taken to new digital engagements in a lasting way (McKinsey 2020), but the loss of analogue working opportunities was felt most harshly in the global south (World Bank 2020).

### **Analogue craft in lockdown crisis - the need for creative rethinking of product consumption.**

The Indian craft sector offers often precarious employment for up to 200 million people, with significant numbers being de facto employees of international brands, as many studies have traced (Edwards 2016, Greru and Kalkreuter 2017, Kalkreuter 2020). Accordingly, the sector suffered considerably under COVID 19 lockdown as an international crash in fashion consumption badly impacted textiles and related crafts sectors with orders being cancelled en masse. At the same time tourism was virtually brought to a standstill overnight by travel bans, and with little state support available, NGOs, national craft networks and international academe raced to explore alternative ways of income generation for traditional makers in crisis. The disruptive urgency that the unexpected lockdown brought to many traditional making communities allowed for some free thinking that brought creative ideas around narration of craft, with makers at the centre of an inclusive agenda for change in the face of conflict.

### **CLICC, the 'COVID Lockdown Impact on Craft Capacity' Project**

The Global Challenges Research funded project CLICC thus started out as an emergency initiative to provide immediate income for Indian artisans during lockdown while keeping artisanal activity in the paying public's mind during travel bans, but we recount here how the existential challenges that COVID disruption had brought to artisans showed new potential for harnessing digital technologies in order to extend care for craft beyond the usual protection of ancient practices.

### **Heritage in the digital sphere - for marketing and collaboration**

Digital opportunities for the crafts have been globally harnessed since the start of the 21st century at least, initially often with a marketing focus, but more recently also as a tool for user collaboration. In India, thanks to the relatively wide reach of smartphone ownership and a concerted drive by NGOs and craft organisations to empower entrepreneurial activity in craft individuals and communities, a solid proportion of artisans are already digital natives who seek to advertise and sell products on social media platforms. What is much less prevalent, however, is digital recording of the making of craft as a

tool for engaging paying customers, a cultural good in itself, or towards a shared sustainability agenda.

To scope this field of new craft narrative potential, CLICC sought to investigate how perceptions of what constitutes the cultural value of making heritage might vary between maker and audience, and what questions of intangible heritage ownership and innovation potential its digitisation might bring with it, especially when traditional making processes were transmitted, as a temporary or permanent record, to paying customers from outside traditional communities.

### **The collateral of exclusion in top-down narratives**

Chandan Bose offers a dispassionate account of how the hallmark of Geographical Indication, promotes a consumption of craft that is laced with a moral participation in the "lived tradition" (Nash 1993), whereby Westerners "consume the region" (Chiarappa 1997) as they purchase goods (2016). In India, GI can be traced back to a colonial historiography informed by surveys and exhibitions of crafts by region, and such "colonial fixing of artisanal products to discrete localities" (Kawlr 2014, 6) affords the intended protection to those living in the designated areas.

It remains a powerful marketing tool as discerning consumers are willing to pay for the narrative of authenticity, but it is necessarily contested by those outside the narrow geography and tradition that has been linked to a product in this way, especially where those outside the geography might have a legitimate claim to be alternative experts in a making practice. In his study into Cheriya paintings, Bose has been able to show how "GI has come to re/construct the history of practice" as he cites master artisan Vaikuntam's welcoming of the certification as affording the protection once given by caste and a mindset of community shielded from outsiders (2016, 124-27), a reading of GI's societal origins previously confirmed also by Roy (2008, 118).

In that sense the GI's promotion of authenticity is not just literally exclusive, but also highly political and a source of conflict: when seen through the modern desirable of social mobility, authenticity narratives that aim to gatekeep the agency of some might then conflict with emerging cultural narratives that seek to empower others or all (Willner and Ghassan 2017).

It is in this context that CLICC sought to investigate the inclusive opportunities that new digital media can bring to the not already protected actors of narratives around making, and what agencial, financial and cultural resources they might be able to harness through such practice.

### **Varied actors of heritage narration and documentation**

Much literature on the digitisation of heritage currently concentrates on tangible heritage and visitor interaction with museum collections of historic artefacts created by makers of the past. While such interaction with artefacts in which the producer or "owner" is no longer alive is fundamentally different to digital narratives created by makers, such literature shares CLICC's central concern about the roles of "user communities" in selecting "their method, extent, and form of engagement with heritage" (King et al 2016, 93). User communities and research team for CLICC consisted of international craft enthusiasts, cultural tourists and heritage scholars.

The digitisation of a process narrative was approached by the project as an opportunity best explored with and amongst artisans so that they might build capability long term and increase communication of making heritage, in line with similar developments in other heritage industries (e.g. Rahaman 2018), and in the spirit of inclusiveness.

However, since the project was keen to find economic opportunities during an acute financial crisis for artisans, and informed as it was by research recognising that much traditional craft identity is actively “formed and negotiated (...) with specific design scenarios and actors” (Greru and Kalkreuter 2017, 137), the team first sought to identify consumer expectations of craft process narrations with two small focus groups of experienced cultural tourists and design collaborators around craft from the UK and India, whom we called superusers:

### What superusers expect from digital heritage narration

Having had considerable pre-lockdown exposure to in-person artisan process and product experience in the Indian craft field, the CLICC superusers highlighted three key concerns for any external interventions aimed at harnessing digital craft narration for a multiple care agenda:

#### Visibility and quality

Brand identity and a virtual home for accessing craft narration were recommended so that films would stand out amongst the growing number of free-to-air offerings by amateur enthusiasts aimed at simple make instruction. Heritage makers cannot be presumed to be capable demonstrators of making, and against professional and able amateur competition the filmic and technical quality of digitised narration appears key and problematic at the same time.

#### Content and format

Outsourcing any editing of content beyond heritage communities raised concerns over authorship and boundaries between helpful advice and undue prescription of content by outsiders, and the superusers cautioned respect so as not to ‘insult’ artisans by suggesting that complex and ancient craft knowledge could be packaged into a short instructional video. CLICC’s technical team produced a step-by-step guide on how to shoot and do basic edits of film footage of a craft process. The guide is richly illustrated with photographs and diagrams and has been translated into Hindi and several vernacular languages of India to capture different cognitive preferences and have a wide geographical reach. It covers: Introduction to various social media platforms; Video shooting with specific good frame criteria for various platforms; Transfer of files from camera to card; Setting up a tripod amongst other things.

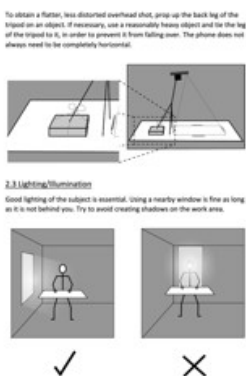


Figure 1. CLICC Craft Video Guide 2020.

### Benefit for artisans and for craft

Beyond CLICC’s immediate goal of empowering artisans economically during lockdown disruption, the benefits of digital craft narrative were seen to include: Keeping artisans in the eye of the public with a view to future sales and visits; forming the beginning of a repository of craft skills; paving the way for digital collaborations by upskilling craft communities.

### What artisans consider the story of craft to be

As soon as the team approached artisans, it became apparent that preferences on making narratives might be more easily formulated by consumers than by craft practitioners themselves, raising once more questions of craft narrative authenticity and indeed its raison d’être between marketing tool, knowledge repository or genuinely welcomed channel for dissemination of a maker’s knowledge. CLICC’s sample of collaborating artists was determined by the network connections of the project researchers, thereby favouring artisans already connected to academia and NGOs. While not representative of an estimated 200 million artisans in India, the strategy promised a realistic prospect of communication during COVID and included material crafts from weaving to woodcarving to basketry.

### Field researcher and artisan decisions on making process

Bead artisan Sitaben was designated ‘Super Artisan’ as she was local, professionally known to the project’s Indian field researcher and could be reached during the height of the Indian lockdown. An image of the artisan at work in her home and a short pilot video that Sitaben shot early on for the project are analysed here in turn to explain the disparities of expectations on craft narratives. A teenage neighbour assisted the artisan with the technical realisation of filming guidance offered by the team.

Sitaben seated on a bedstead in her home in Ahmedabad shows a pragmatic and process-focused setup, with the maker dressed in clothing that favours comfort over tradition, wearing plain bead jewellery that does not begin to showcase her extraordinary skills, and making heritage objects in a rather eclectic interior setting that mixes modern prints with traditional mirror-work embroidery. We are witnessing here an unselfconscious scene of craft, one unpretentiously focused on the process in that it does not put heritage content centre-stage other than in the made objects themselves. This focus on practice rather than a wider contextual narrative of craft heritage was further evidenced when CLICC asked Sitaben to document her bead craft in a pilot video:



Figure 2. Sitaben at work in Ahmedabad. Photograph taken by field researcher Amisha Bajpai in June 2020.

Figure 3. Still from Sitaben’s pilot narrative of her bead craft. Filmed by Sitaben in the summer of 2020.

### Cultural probes with artisans

Competitive day rate stipends were provided to allow for collaborations with artisans that valued them as co-researchers rather than mere participants, and Sitaben was commissioned thus commissioned to document her making practice, initially with very little additional information other than the broad aims of CLICC. This approach resembled a cultural probe as its wide brief allowed for agency to be transferred from project team to maker, and provided with a basic smartphone and tripod, Sitaben focused her craft narration on the production of a beaded object. In just over 2 minutes of footage, we can make out the fingertips of the artisan working on an already advanced piece of a colourful beaded rectangle above a copper bowl full of assorted beads. She adds a few rows of beads before finishing off the piece by producing a loop as for a pendant and moving the completed object around to find different camera angles.

Sitaben submitted this first short video film just days after she had been provided with a basic smartphone and interestingly she chose to focus her short video on an unnarrated angle on her hands as they thread beads from a large copper tray. Much emphasis is on the counting of the beads, while the technique of how shapes are formed by threading complicated stitches through the bead formations is made less clear. There is an accidental soundtrack of urban background noises, reminding us of the workshop location in busy downtown Ahmedabad. The camera angle shows little regard beyond the materials and hands of the artisan, so the narrative of craft is here understood as one that is manual and material based, in contrast to the much wider angle photo by the CLICC researcher that including the workshop surroundings as desirable.

### Conclusions on inclusive care narratives

#### The parallel narratives of craft

Against the backdrop of urgent Global Challenges for craft during COVID lockdown, CLICC explored questions around creating digital narratives of craft. Initial findings from this ongoing project point towards a wide range of possible narratives around craft, the usefulness and appropriateness of which depend very much on the expectation and relationship each actor has with the craft thus narrated. The bringing together of UK and Indian expertise in craft, heritage studies, digital technologies, pedagogy and entrepreneurship, has proven central to the aim to co-characterise the challenges and opportunities of heritage narratives for a wide care agenda.

#### Technology capabilities matter

The project highlighted issues of hierarchy and agency around digital access and identified the importance of determining who benefits when heritage process is shared digitally via different models (Miller 2020), as mobile phone and online capability varies generationally and culturally, as Sitaben's example of accepting technology help from a young neighbour evidenced.

#### An inclusive approach to heritage narratives focuses on communities more than agendas

- » Narration can portray a physical making space, highlight a local or geographical context, focus on practice or objects, as long as ultimate control remains with owner communities.

- » The definition of "ownership" must be reflected upon to be flexible, fair and inclusive.
- » To afford "owners" inclusive access to expression, footage might be silent at point of capture, but it can be narrated synchronously or voiced over later in vernacular language; to open up any spoken narration to wider audiences and causes, agreed subtitles may be added.
- » Expert editing and marketing should be weighed up with the threat for the agency of narrative owners, with an emphasis on digital capacity building preferable for the agenda of inclusivity.
- » Virtuality as a green alternative to cultural tourism, as cultural repository or as research into heritage for current agendas emerges as more inclusive and conducive to a wide ranging care plan than digital clips aimed solely at the experience economy.

### Wider implications from CLICC as heritage narratives become instruments of care

CLICC's central idea of supporting artisans and users of crafted goods to move from being traditional 'makers and consumers of product' to 'keepers and seekers of skills' links with a number of current design themes that have gathered pace in the face of the COVID disruption:

#### Moving image as much more than narration of process

The project was able to position filmed narration of craft as spanning all usually cited categories from representing chiefly the filmed actor (Brun-Cottan & Wall 1995, Suchman & Trigg 1991) to offering consumers fragments of practice to engage with (Buur & Soendergaard 2000), to wider evidence of cultural practice (Blomberg, Giacomi, Mosher, Swenton-Wall 1993) and documentation of design scenarios (Halse, Brandt, Clark & Binder 2010). This well-documented flexibility of filmed narration is mirrored in the myriad debated opportunities and filmed or photographed pilots that the researchers, superusers and artisans of this project generated so far, and offers a wide portfolio of care scenarios.

#### Digitisation as a move for democratic access and against climate emergency

More analysis into the possible format and potential impact of each of these content varieties of narration is under way, with many lateral applications in the digitised heritage field also already indicated by the project discussion. Amongst these are augmented reality opportunities and prospects of connecting distant skill keepers and seekers in a burgeoning repair economy. A current cultural transformation in design and the arts is widely believed to go hand in hand with the disruption of modes of production and consumption (Diez 2019), and new forms of communication, such as CLICC's artisan-generated craft narrations, can be seen in this context of systemic change. Diez (2012) has asserted that digital revolutions in computing, communications and manufacturing are personal, global and local respectively and while his focus is on new physical spaces for shared production such as Fab Labs and Makerspaces, he emphasises the digital opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and the improvement of the quality of life of communities with the development of interventions in the real world. Just as in this context of collaboration in shared maker spaces, the production and commercialisation of making narratives should be understood not just as a technologi-



cal challenge, but also a socio-cultural discourse (Diez 2019). Artisan-generated narratives that can disseminate and monetise craft knowledge through digital means can in this context be seen as a potential tool for democratisation of access to both consumption and production of cultural knowledge.

### **Disruption as catalyst towards increasing resilience of craft through digitised narratives**

The need for increasing digital capacity and skills to respond to disruption to our normal ways of consumption and production seems evermore important post COVID while remaining a significant factor also in the much-needed change of our relationship with planet Earth, its resources and inhabitants. Democratising tools for digital documentation and distribution through the key activities of heritage narratives should be part of a disruptive attempt towards reducing global hierarchies of empowerment, and towards futures that are desirable and prosperous for all.

CLICC has highlighted matters of power balances and agency that require careful consideration to counteract potential for digital heritage narratives to “lead us to repeat (...) extractivist and colonialist logics (...) that extract personal data and commercialize with them merchandise for product positioning through personalized marketing strategies” (Diez 2019). CLICC has now co-produced a highly visual guide on the techniques of shooting craft narratives with input from mainly technical and artisanal stakeholders in India and the UK, and it has collaborated with NGOs and the wider arts community in India on translating the written instructions of the guide into as many vernacular languages as possible before distributing it as a free open-source material amongst craft communities and arts networks.

As far as content is concerned, the team recognises that its early and continued engagement with artisans can only be seen as the beginning of an empowerment of those actors who need to be in charge of the well-documented tensions between an almost nostalgic promotion of craft heritage (Greru and Kalkreuter 2017) in pursuit of the UN's Sustainable Development Goal #8 (decent work and economic growth)

and the modernizing forces of SDGs #9, 12 and 13 (relating to technology, innovation and sustainable production and consumption). The project's networks have contributed to dialogue with established and emerging action groups for craft in India, and the team continue to be deeply engaged with local and global crafts and academic communities.

The methodology employed in this project has facilitated impact on a wide scale: the project now works with two leading NGOs in reaching craft communities, with further footage received by artisan *Sahil* on Felting in Himachal Pradesh, by *Zafar bhai* on Glass blowing in Firozabad, by *Shakil bhai* on Batik printing in Mundra, by *Raju bhai* on Wood carving in Idar, by *Palden* on Basketry in Sikkim and Weaving from Kutch, with some 8 local languages projected to be covered in addition to Hindi and English. The pool of artisans who might participate now exceeds 50 and covers more than a dozen very distinct disciplines and even more localities across India. The initial project investigators and the wider project team are aiming at longevity as footage from artisans is being received beyond the finish date of the funded project, and the work has become a new, artisan driven facet of well-established and regular engagement with heritage communities by Universities Srishti and NID, and NGOs 200millionartisans and Dastkar. In that sense, CLICC hopes to have contributed to another dimension of inclusive outreach from academia to craft communities beyond the customary relationships of design championing craft in order to reach new markets and customers. Interest from heritage organisations and artisans is currently moving towards repair agendas, perhaps suggesting that empowerment of marginalised actors is being achieved, and certainly showing potential for reaching towards a new multifaceted understanding of what inclusive care for all and everything in the heritage sector may mean and can achieve. With that, the project is well placed to explore opportunities beyond its initial regional and material focus to find further heritage-driven disruptive interventions in a continued difficult economic climate and amidst societal conflict.

Approaches from other research teams and individuals are actively encouraged.

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