

## **Conflict and Culture Post Design Intervention Report by Tanya Zakir**

**Key Themes:** Peace (Rehab / Reformation), Artisans (Livelihood), Policy (Bureaucracy vs the Craftswomen)

**Introduction:** As Yakjah's collaboration with the hub is moving closer to the final steps, the design intervention was not only an essential step but also one that opened the door to further conversations regarding a range of topics. From the foundational requirements of the craftswomen associated with our project to the larger picture of how craftspersons navigate their space in the Jammu and Kashmir economy, we have touched on a complicated thread related to the livelihoods of those in the handicrafts business.

The setting of the design intervention for the Kashmiri women was highly interesting. It allowed for the intersection of all the women's experiences, singular and collective. Singularly, the women carry stories of violence, sexism, lack of targeted resources, and sacrifice. Collectively, the women carry stories of violence, religious and political divides, a sense of loss, and much more. In this brief report, I shall analyse the various key thematics that I observed and briefly expand on the same.

As an observer, it was a unique experience. Interacting with the women at a grounded level (read: heart to hearts in a chilly room next to the Dal) and listening to local leaders and government officials offer their two cents was an eye-opening opportunity. The need of the hour is blatantly obvious - ample work must be done to fix current policies and ensure that craftspersons know the benefits they can avail themselves of. There is also the issue of inclusivity, or rather the lack thereof. A dismissive, tone-deaf outlook is presented toward feminist struggles by those in positions of power.

### **Peace (Rehab / Reformation):**

As mentioned previously, the setting of the design intervention itself was interesting. The juxtaposition of women from strained religious backgrounds, with a history scarred by violence, posed an interesting question for everyone present in the room - will they get along? Kashmiri Pandit women who joined the project still live in migrant camps, displaced from their homeland. Present circumstances in Kashmir continue to remain a cause for concern. For these women, returning to Kashmir for an extended period of time to take part in a workshop was an act of bravery almost. A mix of apprehension, joy, and anxiety were apparent in their conversations.

On the other hand, Kashmiri Muslim women, face regular discrimination, violence and often watch as their homeland remains in the clutches of a situation that seems to have

no resolution. Some women from the group have experienced personal losses due to the conditions in Kashmir. They brought with them fear, hope, and a fervour to learn so they can improve their current economic conditions.

A third emotion was continuous in the room - one of curiosity. Not just towards the trainer and the work that was being done but also towards one another. Fearmongering and “fake” news is often rife in places of conflict. Additionally, women in such conditions are often privy to such information through other sources rather than obtaining them on their own. Due to this, women of both backgrounds, despite being Kashmiri at heart, had absolutely no idea about each others’ lives, trials and tribulations.

Conversations were opened, and where those fell short, they found themselves thinking about hardships faced by each one in the room. It would be naive to say that everyone gelled seamlessly. However, the women found one common ground among it all - being craftswomen in a state with ongoing conflict and threat. The struggle to preserve their craft and their identity as Kashmiri women while finding empowerment in their work brought the women together. Regardless of who I spoke with, they were all keen on taking the workshop further and were more than happy to work together if it resulted in a better livelihood.

### **Artisans (Livelihood):**

Perhaps the most basic necessity for all human life is a decent livelihood. To earn enough, stand on your own two feet. The women found this to be a common thread and a topic for discussion during workshop times. A good majority of the women were further motivated by pride in the craft of their state and want to preserve it for future generations. Despite the looming threat of machines taking over their work entirely, they continue to better themselves and find new ways to thrive in the modern, capitalist world. Perseverance and resilience united every woman present.

### **Policy (Bureaucracy vs the Craftswomen):**

A more policy-targeted approach is essential to Yakjah’s partnership with the hub. For this reason, visiting the leaders in charge of the women’s future was essential. The visits were nothing short of disheartening. In this particular report I am speaking of the Kashmir experience. During his visit to the workshop, DC Crafts Kashmir made it a point to sit on a sofa, separated from the craftswomen in his presence. No question or conversation was relayed to them, and he spoke in English or Hindi/Urdu, which are languages highly inaccessible for the women. There was a clear effort to separate himself from the women - to be seen as their superior (or as the English would put it - ‘sarkari babu’). Following his visit, the women feigned their disappointment. They felt neglected

and expressed anger at the dismissive nature of the man whose job description is to lead a path that better the lives of craftspeople in Kashmir.

When we visited his office however, his demeanour changed. While he did dodge the question of how and why women face inequalities in the crafts sector, overall, he appeared optimistic and open to change. He was impressed by the work and even commented on how he himself feels a need for design interventions to be held for craftspeople of Kashmir to bring them up-to-speed with latest trends. The DC was also open to sharing data collected by his department for further research and policy-related suggestions/interventions. In future reports I will further critique the unfortunate attitude back and forth depending on the company, however, overall (especially compared to DC Jammu), meeting him was fruitful. His insights on the condition of craft, its expansion, challenges faced by craftspeople etc., were interesting and based on survey-based data.

### **The Jammu Experience:**

Three groups of women with diverse set of social and cultural experiences were invited in Jammu for the training workshop. These women were practicing Basoli art painting.

### **Bureaucracy vs Craftswomen**

Before the training we tried to understand the experiences of women artisans in Jammu. Their art form is mostly endangered as it doesn't bring a stable income and livelihood. Our first conversation was with the Director Handloom, we visited his office to talk to him and understand the condition of the handicrafts in Jammu region. It was surprising to know during the conversation that most of the skilled instructors that the director mentioned were men and he was very vocally suggesting us that we should involve those skilled men in the project. The director and his associated were playing very defensive on knowing that we are involving women in the training program. The director's defensiveness was also because of the women who were in there interviewing him. When asked about the condition of crafts in Jammu valley, he said it has improved a lot and the government is taking care of the artisans through different schemes, though he denied commenting about the schemes and its reach to the actual beneficiaries. He also disagreed that women's face disproportionate level of struggles as compared to men, that affects one's ability to master a craft.

### **Identity and Crafts:**

There were three women groups in Jammu who had participated from different places with diverse experiences, all of them were doing the Basoli art. During the interview

most of the women linked the art with their identity and they feel a great responsibility to save and promote this art form. In a society where it is hard to find their own voices, they feel that this art gives them their identity and allows them to transcend the gendered boundaries built by men. There was a Muslim woman who was drawing a Hindu goddess and she feels that her identity as a Muslim diminishes when she is working on a piece of art. It was also observed during the interview that most of these women learnt and continued this art form, as this is something they can do at their own convenience and thus doesn't face resistance from the male members of their family which they get in other professions. For most of these artisans, their craft helps them transcend the existing ethnic, religious, and regional prejudices and build a common identity of craftswomen.

### **Challenges of Women Artisans:**

The diverse group of women had representation from different ethnicities and they face double burden of discrimination because of patriarchy and because of their ethnic identity. There is a sense of state apathy when dealing with women with certain ethnicities. The Basoli art helps these women to navigate their repressive identities and build their identity as a craftswoman, that gives them visibility and acceptance.

The training workshop came as a savior to the women artisans, the training not only helped them to reimagine their craft but also made them feel heard and appreciated, it provided them means to upskill their art and helped them to understand and create their own market. The women group believes that with a little support in the forms of training workshops they can very well preserve their craft and create their own livelihood.