

Govandi Arts Festival

Crafts & Skills Mapping with Meera Goradia

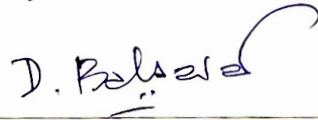
Reshma Issac
216450003

Project Guide
Prof. Deepa Balsavar

Approval Sheet

This Design Exploration Seminar (DES) project entitled 'Govandi Arts Festival: Crafts and Skill Mapping by Reshma Issac, 216450003, is approved for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Design (M. Des) degree in Communication Design, at IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay

Project Guide



Prof. Deepa Balsavar

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Place IDC IIT Bombay

1.1 Introduction

Natwar Parekh Compound (henceforth referred to as NPC) is home to over 10,000 people residing in 53 buildings. It hosts a diverse population of people rehabilitated from all over Mumbai and are among the most marginalised in the city. These people are involved in various vocations for their daily bread. It comes as little surprise then that NPC is also home to people with varied skill sets and those who have mastered unique crafts. While a majority of people are involved in basic, easy to learn but in demand skills such as sewing, a craft mapping of the area (carried out by Shireen and Shahista, volunteers from the community) reveals a number of people who have developed and are masters at rare skills and crafts. An emerging pattern across the skills within the community is that it is very evidently subject to the circumstances of the smaller cultural and social subgroups within the larger network that makes up the community. For instance, almost all of the women who are Mehendi artists are Muslim. Or that most people involved in sewing or bead-work are women.

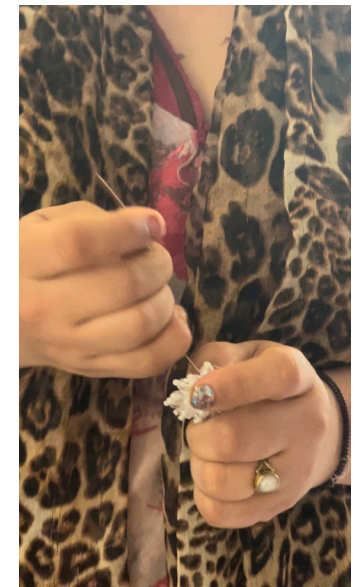
1.2 The Survey

Shireen and Shahista are two women from the community who volunteered to map the various crafts and skills in NPC. They are both full-time mothers who went from door to door filling out survey forms and photographing craftspeople and artisans and their craft. They have identified and documented 148 people who were involved in textile specific skills such as weaving, knitting, crocheting, and sewing. Most of these 148 people were women who picked up these skills as important life skills or as a hobby and only few had any interest in expanding their skills into an established business. Some, of course, picked up stitching as a vocation, stitching blouses and salwars, to finance their living. The men involved in textiles were Men's tailors, and as in the case of Akbar Ji, also stitched tote bags in bulk, and practised sewing at a commercial scale.

About 38 people were documented as Mehendi (also known as Henna tattoos) artisans (although, it later became evident that more people than were documented in the survey were at least at an amateur level Mehendi artisans). Most Mehendi artists were muslim women, some as young as 16 years old. Mehendi is popular and in demand as a wedding or ceremonial cosmetic in our country, and especially so in muslim ceremonies.

A handful of people worked with miniscule plastic beads and turned them into miniature floral arrangements that later went on to become part of jewellery such as earrings and necklaces. Others practised what they referred to as 'stone embroidery' which is technically the same tiny beads embroidered onto garments.

The survey also pointed to the fact that people were at times skilled at multiple things. A person who was a Mehendi artist could also be really skilled at sewing and also be a wedding make-up artist. Some even picked up skills over the internet (especially through tutorials on YouTube) and made income. This could be read as a nod to the multiple, criss-crossing realities of our modern day existence where people are evolving with the evolution and increased access to technology. Doorways to worlds otherwise closed off to the most marginalised among us has certainly been opened to an extent with the digital revolution.



1.3 The Workshops

It was recognised by the organisers that hosting workshops for and by the people of the community across the four days spanning the Arts Festival would open up avenues of opportunity that could benefit this community of artisans and craftspeople that silently exists, enclosed within Natwar Parekh Compound. This could prove to be especially useful for the large number of women artisans who come from strict orthodox families governed by patriarchal world-views. These women are rarely empowered to seek opportunities outside of what is dictated to them. Workshops organised under the larger, community based idea of the Arts Festival could provide them with not just exposure to opportunities that could enhance their skills but also to showcase skills and crafts they are already masters of to a larger audience - all in a safe, trusted space. With this in mind (and also the survey that was conducted) a few key areas were explored for the workshops that were to be hosted - Textile, Mehendi, Make-up, Sustainable Gardening methods - and a possibility of also exploring Jewellery making.

Since a large number of the people surveyed were involved in some way in working with fabric and garments, and were more or less on the same skill level, it made sense to help interested participants to enhance their skills in an area with stiff competition to set them apart. It seemed from the survey that 'Silai' or stitching was an overly saturated skill at NPC and the women were not really interested in commercialising this particular skill set because of this over-saturation. A workshop that could help them enhance this skill in a novel way and without financially burdening them was the most ideal way to approach this. Designer Anuj

Sharma is a textiles designer from Ahmedabad who does just this. He pioneered a sustainable method for putting together fashionable garments which required the use of upcycled fabric and buttons and no sewing whatsoever. He calls his method Button Masala. He was invited to mentor participants from the community for a workshop where he would pass on his knowledge of the method and invite them to look at fabric in innovative new ways.

Mehendi is an art form that has perfected over several centuries and has remained in popular demand in South-Asian countries such as our own. It is an art form that is not under threat of dying out anytime soon and has also seen some level of popularisation in western pop culture in recent years. Despite this, it is an art form as fascinating as ever for its beautiful, intricate designs, often inspired by natural forms such as those of flora and fauna, and because of its impermanent nature. Predominantly worn by women as an adornment for special events such as festivities or weddings, it is an art form practised popularly all over the country. While a big chunk of the artists are women, men are also seen practising Henna tattooing as a vocation. Many women at NPC are expert Mehendi artists and also went to skill development centres in the area to learn the art form. It made sense then to shortlist expert teachers from the community to hold workshops where they could teach passersby interested in learning and witnessing the art form up close.

Upon further interaction with the community, it was found that a large number of women, especially those who were younger adults, showed keen interest in the possibility of exploring make-up as an art form. While a lot of them expressed their interest in 'glam' or wedding makeup (the type that involves working with products and tools popularised in mainstream culture by MUAs, abbreviation for makeup artist), the group that signed up for the workshop were not dissuaded in their enthusiasm when the MUA invited was someone who specialised in prosthetic makeup in the film industry.

1.4 Recruiting Participants and Teachers for the Workshops

To be able to 'recruit', or more accurately convince people to give their time (especially those who have barely enough time to give) wasn't a one step process of aiming blindly at a target and hoping to hit the mark. It was a process that required a fair bit of planning and a lot of patience. But the many delightful and unexpected quirks, and the mindless passing and acquiring of wisdom definitely made the process fruitful.

The process involved the following steps. It was important that I was aided by someone from the community who people could trust and open up to during interactions. I could also in turn rely on this person to help me navigate through the maze of reflections that is NPC, where every street and corner looked identical and would require an eye trained by experience to point out the differences. Since Hindi is the common language of communication at NPC, and since my own grasp of the language isn't as fluent as I'd have liked it to have been, I would be able to rely on this person who was to assist me in communicating and translating to the people I'd be interacting with.

Before even going door to door, guided by the survey data, a few key questions to ask and information to be provided was outlined. For instance, workshops where teachers from the community were recruited, the dates and time slots for conducting the specific workshop, the venue, the compensation, the materials to be provided, etc were discussed and finalised before even going about speaking to them. And in the case of workshops that required participant registration (learners), as was the case of the Button Masala workshop,

information regarding the workshop such as who was conducting it, what would be the outcome, the portfolio of work of the teacher (pictures of the work was shown to possible participants on phones), etc was collected prior to recruiting.

However, it is important to note that this format only developed over time and the first few interactions with the people from the community were for workshop ideas that were later discarded (such as the Haldi Jewellery making and Earring making/ bead-work workshops). Some initial workshop ideas had to be discarded as it was discovered down the process that the value associated with certain skills or crafts were overestimated or were just not unique and specific to the community that resides at NPC.

1.5 The Interactions

1.5.1 The Children of Natwar Parekh Compound

Although the interactions were tied to the workshops, be it recruiting participants or artisans, or talking to vendors in the neighbouring Shivaji Nagar market, it was not strictly bound to it. In fact, there were opportunities to interact and mingle with random curious folks, especially the best kind - children. Since Kitaab Mahal, the community library for young children, was the base from where all of us worked towards the festival, it was essentially unavoidable that we interact with these kids who walked in and out of the library all day. They were curious about the happenings, refused to call you anything but 'teacher', and as the days passed by their numbers increased and they have to be credited for a lot of the buzz and excitement about the approaching festival.

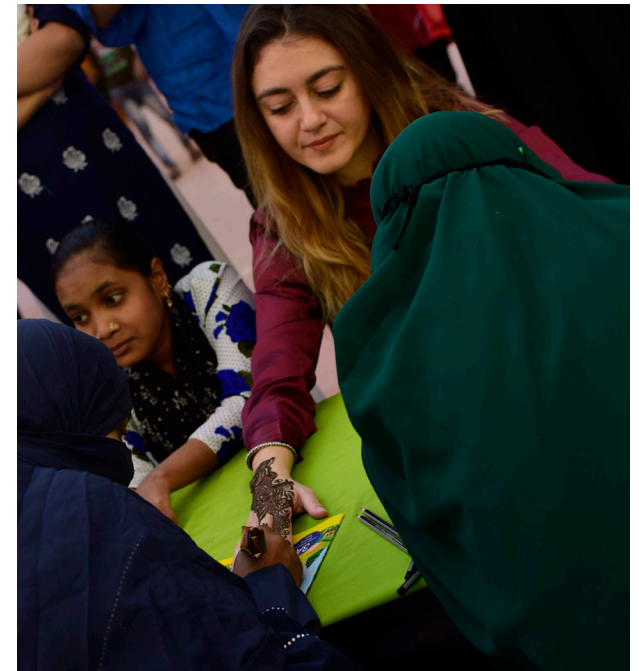
1.5.2 The Women of Natwar Parekh Compound

The interactions with the women was limited mostly to those who responded to the crafts mapping survey (with some minor deviations based on who accompanied me to the houses). What seemed like an intimidating task at first became not only easier but also something to look forward to, after the first couple of interactions.

Much was learned, but especially that most women were extremely and whole-heartedly welcoming and warm, very articulate about their thoughts, were self-taught in a lot of cases, and were curious about learning and not letting an opportunity to know more or express more pass.

At first, the interaction was somewhat choppy and inarticulate, but as my grasp over communication got better, so did the interaction. What was at first a slow process because people were rightfully sceptical, soon started to overwhelm the maximum number of participants for each workshop as outlined by the organisers at CDA.

Unsurprisingly, there were instances of stark contrasts in the way people responded when approached. Households were either very keen on opportunities to empower their daughters, wives, or sisters through workshop participation, or outright rejected it. While some grandmothers and mother-in-laws thought it was best for the girls in the house to learn everything that life had to offer, others thought time could be better utilised running errands that mattered to the household. Many women stated that they were interested but highly doubted if their husbands or even sons would let them be involved in such activities. In fact, in the case of Asiya Amanullah Shaikh, a community craftsperson, who was extraordinarily skilled at upcycling waste material such as worn out sweaters into beautiful wall-hangings that somewhat represented a dreamcatcher, was really unsure about the men in her family letting her hold a workshop. Only after a few phone calls with the husband and her son by Meera Goradia and a direct interaction with the husband ensuring that he would also be present at the workshop, was Asiya allowed to participate.



1.5.3 The Vendors

Once the list of participants was almost finalised, the next step in the process was to find the specific materials needed for each of the different workshops. One of the goals was to source these materials from within NPC or in the neighbourhoods adjacent to it. Not only does this tie into the larger idea of sustainability and giving back to the community by engaging in commercial exchange with the small scale businesses, but it also makes the transfer of these materials to the venue a lot more efficient and cost effective.

The Shivaji Nagar market, adjoining Natwar Parekh Compound was naturally the first option. What looked like a marketplace that was poorly organised and in disarray, soon seemed to organise itself into sections - sections that sold fabric and textile, corners dedicated to beads and buttons, streets lined with temporary stalls selling all kinds of food items and groceries. Walking into stores, unaccompanied but confident enough to communicate just the right things after days of walking in and out and up and down the many houses at NPC, I quickly understood that the vendors were all more than ready to share their business cards and phone numbers and samples of the materials required. Almost all of the items for the workshops were sourced from this market area.

1.6 Concluding Thoughts

This experience of working collectively towards organising a community based Arts Festival and in an area that required interacting one-on-one with the people from the community, walking up to their doors, and entering their homes even briefly, was in many ways a lesson in humility, generosity, and has definitely challenged me to push the envelope in terms of my comfort zone. Experiencing first hand how people in tightly knit communities rely on each other, how much they value shared knowledge and a sense of pride and seeing it all come to fruition through the Govandi Arts Festival was indeed a valuable life lesson.



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