



Retooling for the Future

J A W A J A

since 1975

Artisans Alliance Jawaja

© AAJ 2009



Sukhdev

| Onkarlal

| Babulal

| Ramlal

This is one partial telling of a far larger set of stories - stories that have been lived by, and at various times scripted and enacted by the artisans of Jawaja, some of whom are present here today. The National Institute of Design kindly facilitated access to their archives. Siddhartha Chatterjee and Anitha Balachandran of Seechange helped put together this curtain-raiser.

Thanks are due to Ashoke Chatterjee, Nilam Iyer, Charlotte Kwon, Helena Peerhenthupa, and Jawaja's artisans and people for the images and work you see here. The Maiwa Textile Symposium and Charlotte Kwon in particular have our gratitude for organizing and supporting this effort.



My name is Sukhdev, I live in ...

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In 1975, the Jawaja block, located in a drought prone district of the north-western state of Rajasthan, India, included about 200 villages that were home to about 80,000 people.

STATE: RAJASTHAN



RAJASTHAN

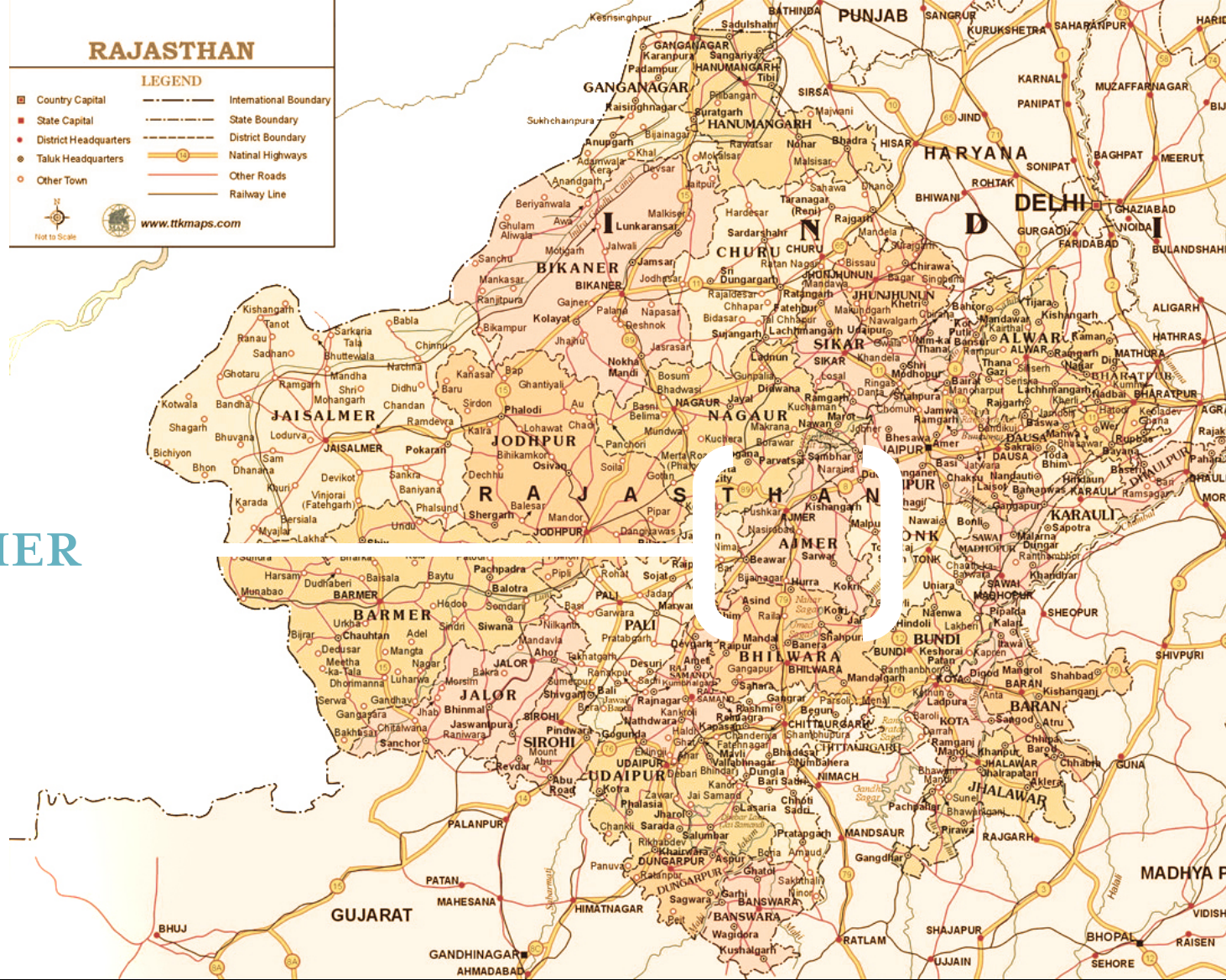
LEGEND

- Country Capital
- State Capital
- District Headquarters
- Taluk Headquarters
- Other Town
- International Boundary
- State Boundary
- District Boundary
- Natal Highways
- Other Roads
- Railway Line



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DISTRICT: AJMER





THE NEAREST
TRANSPORT HUB
IS THE TOWN
BEAWAR



JAWAJA 1975



The road to Jawaja block

a cluster of villages including Beawar Khas, Delvada, Kabra, Kotra, Malpura, Jawaja, Sargaon and Sarmaliya.



A tank en route, replenished by low seasonal rain



A typical village street



At a well





The Government designated Jawaja
a region of high poverty and no resources.





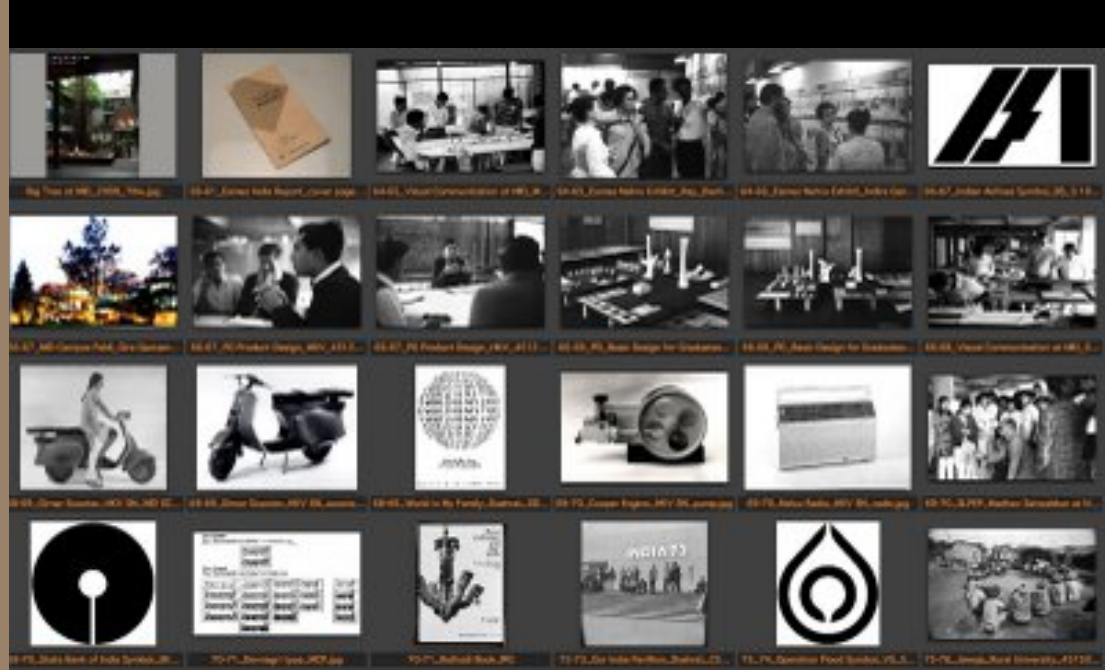


“...no resources”?



That year the National Institute of Design, NID, Ahmedabad was invited to be involved with The Rural University – a new experiment in education and rural development initiated by Ravi J. Matthai, former director of IIMA, the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.





Work facilities and spaces at IIMA and NID

Some key questions before them were:
Could academic institutes actively collaborate with rural communities to catalyze local solutions to problems of poverty and hunger?



A morning bath in a courtyard



A typical *chulha*, or wood-fired earthen stove

Could local self-reliance emerge from a process of mutual learning between such communities and other groups of people?



The Rural University began as an 'action' experiment in learning by doing. It set out as a mutual enquiry into self-reliance, with a deep respect for Jawaja's foremost "resource" – it's people.



" Can people do something for themselves tomorrow that others are doing for them today...
(so that) they should be released of that dependence?" - Ravi Matthai, The Rural University



Weaver Onkarlal and designer Helena Peerhenthupa | Leather artisans with design student Nilam Iyer

The NID teams which joined volunteers from IIMA were led by teachers and students, among whom were textile designer Helena Peerhenthupa and product design student Nilam Iyer.

The teams moved to Jawaja to introduce themselves to some of the poorest lower-caste occupational groups. Over months, they would be accepted and work closely with the *Raigar* families of leather-workers, and the relatively better off *Bunkar* families of weavers.



There were extended public consultations at first. The interests of local elites, and the initial mistrust of more under-privileged groups towards these newcomers became evident. The potentials of ceramics, tobacco leaf, stone, camel-hair and dairy products were considered, and a few experiments initiated. Tomatoes, for one, were to be a limited success!

Although there were few craft traditions known from this area, several people were knowledgeable of spinning and weaving, and there were a few looms.



These looms were used to make woolen shawls, odhnis, and other locally worn textiles woven by the village *Bunkar*, or weaver, to use, barter or sell.



An ornamental cattle harness



Juta, shoes with wonderful embroidery

There were the many objects made from leather: cattle adornments and harnesses, and the widely-worn *Juta*, *Mojari*, or footwear, often colourfully embroidered.

These were made by the *Raigar* community, customarily responsible for skinning and disposing of animal corpses, curing the hides, and the making and fixing of leather products. Already among the lowest status occupations, resentment against the *Raigars* was arguably aggravated by their own community leaders' resolutions, between the mid-40s and 60s, to ban flaying, tanning and shoe repair in order to raise their social status.



Cattle drawing water from a well in a leather *Chara*, 1976

There were also the leather-bags or *Chara* used to draw water from wells, made increasingly obsolete by electric pumps and plastics, which also came to be used to make cheap shoes.

By the 70s those *Raigars* who still worked with leather couldn't flay animals, and so were purchasing what was formerly a free material at market-rates inflated by raw-leather exports, raising their costs and adding to their competitive disadvantage. Fierce punishments were inflicted on those breaking the ban. All this to make a few shoes and harnesses for a shrinking local market.

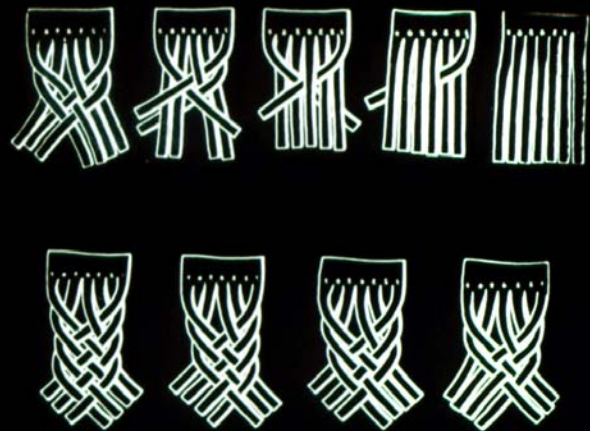


Local markets and resources are operated by those of higher castes.

Despite the entry of modern banking systems and growing awareness of alternative financing, the flexibility and speed of traditional money-lending systems support this difficult sector.



While **Leather work and weaving** represented clear and present challenges to self-reliant livelihood, they also emerged as the opportunity and basis for sustained group effort – and for this story of Jawaja.



Designs and techniques

were refined in dialogue between the artisans and designers, to create a quality range of contemporary, saleable products:



...products such as bags, belts, wallets, folders, rugs, diary covers, and more.

One aim was to reach out to **external markets**, totally unfamiliar to local power structures, in order to create a measure of self-reliance for the artisans.



Pit-tanning in progress



Gathering wool at a local merchant's store

The design and management volunteers worked alongside the artisans to link existing skills with new products, better materials and responsive markets.

Working towards self-reliance meant nurturing and building on available skills (rather than retraining in new occupations or using capital-intensive machinery).

Improved material techniques, faster and more predictable tanning for instance, followed in consultation with organizations like the Central Leather Research Institute.



The weavers and leather crafts groups each have their stories to tell of all this.
And the products speak for themselves.

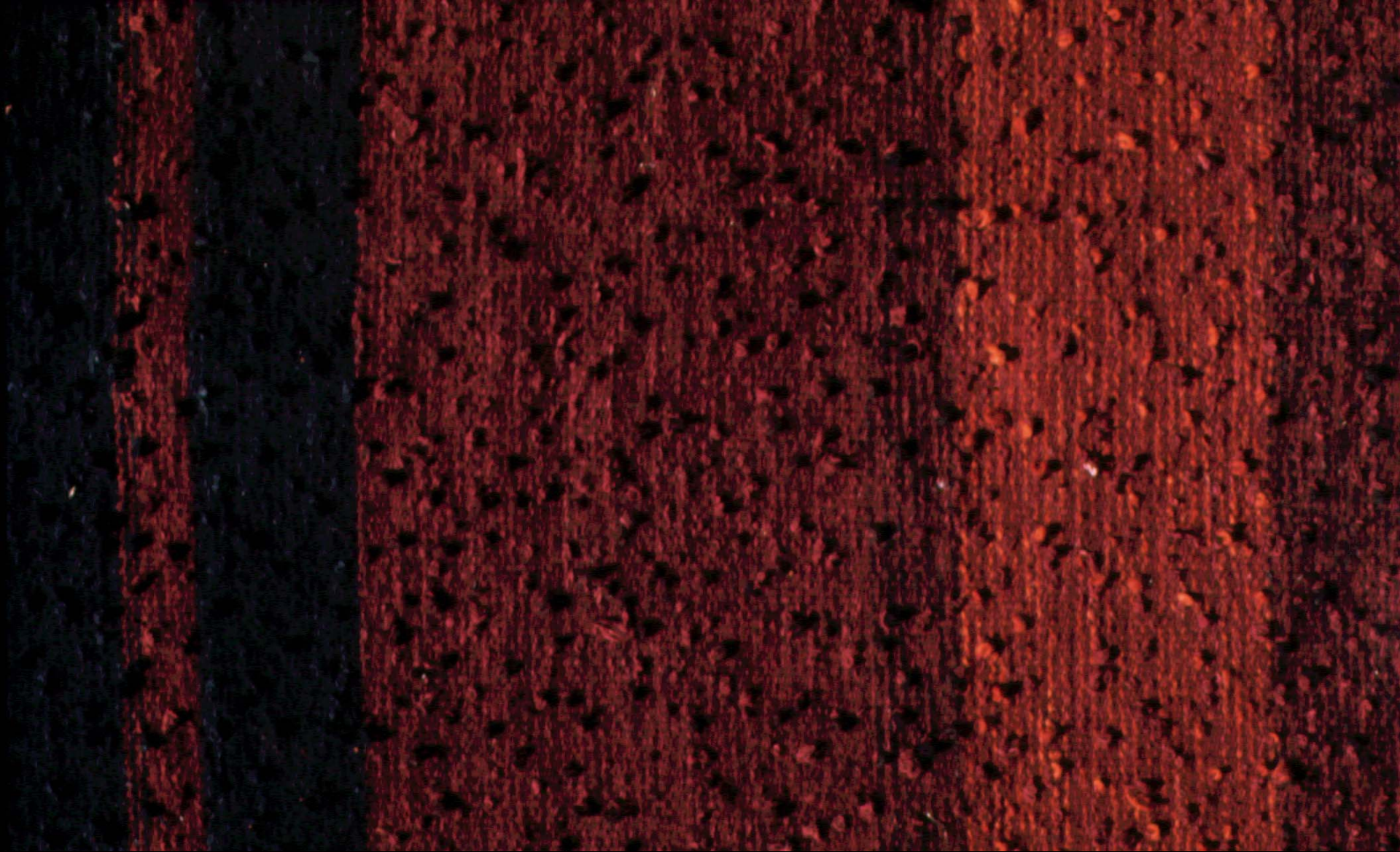




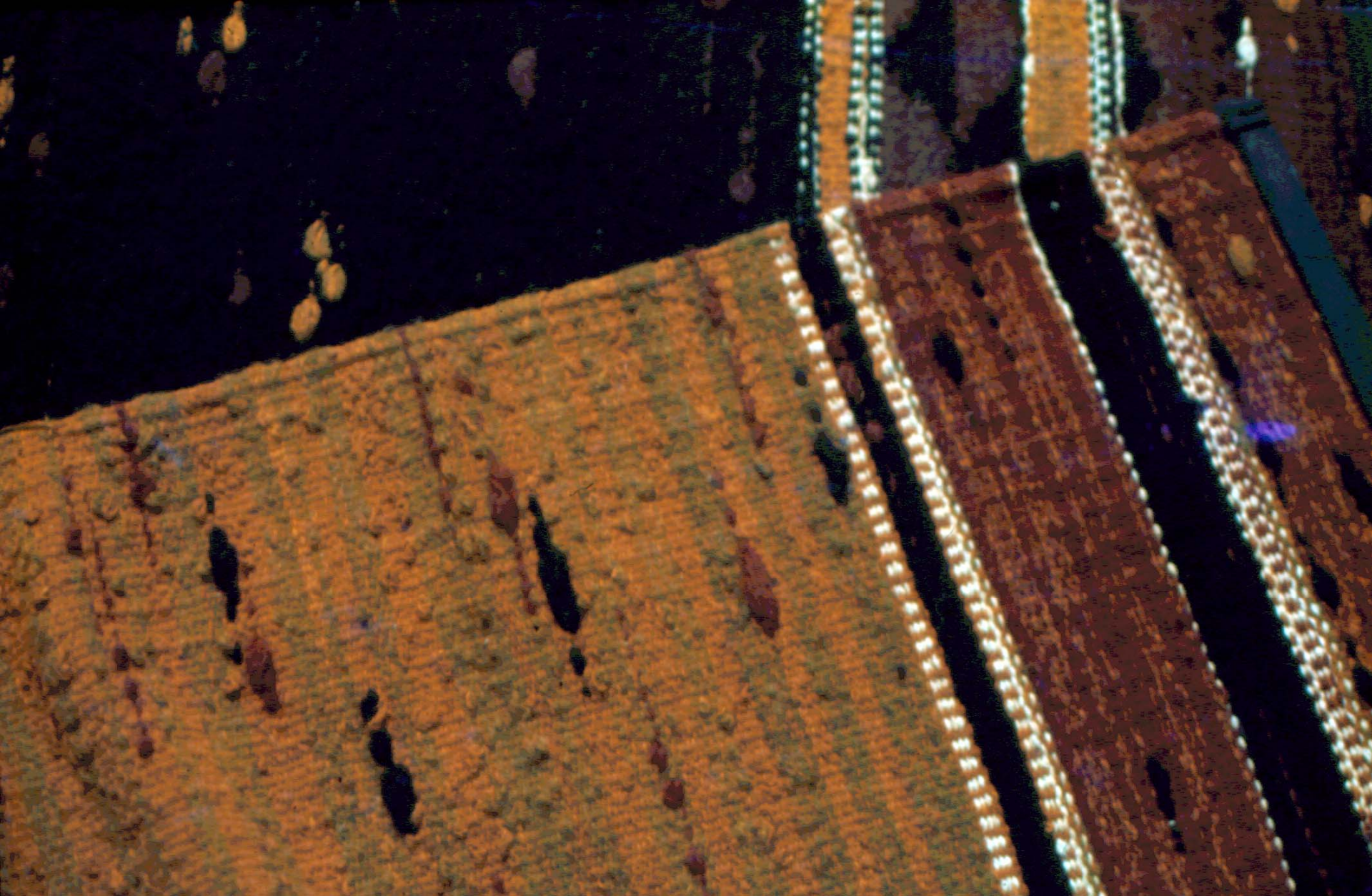




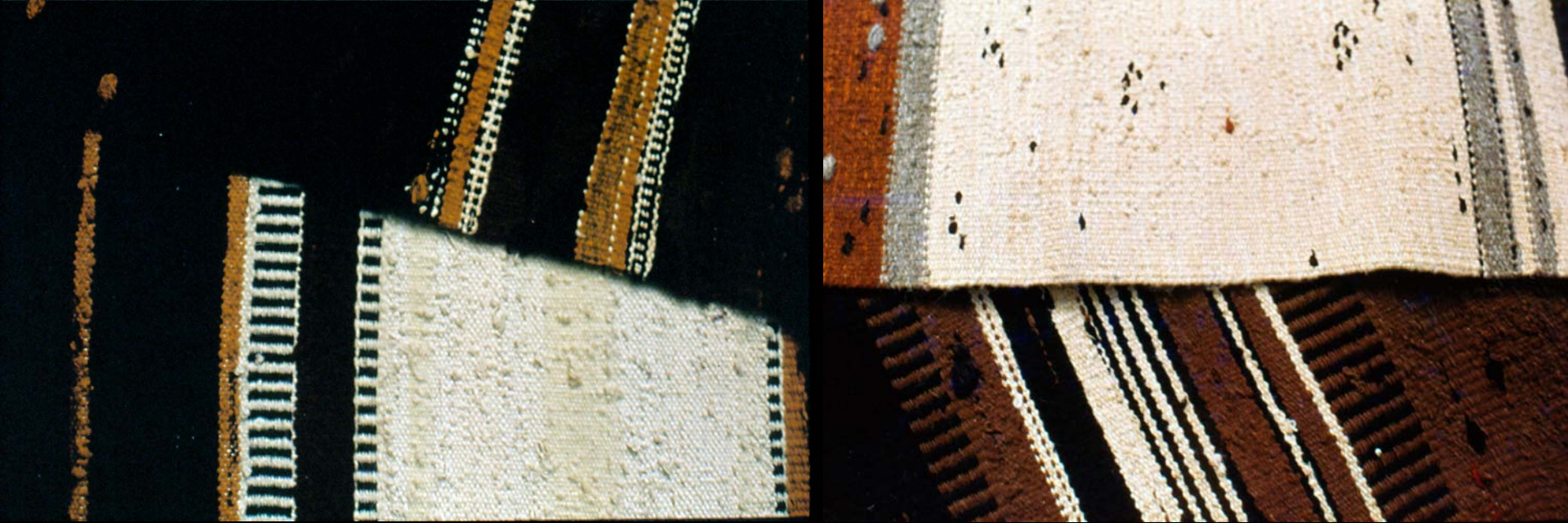
With their striking simplicity and rich earth tones, Jawaja products evoke the landscapes and ecology of these villages;







in them are traces of sand and earth, trees and animals



of patterns and rhythms of the everyday- the very textures of life in the desert.



13

An example of a rug design that a craftsman explained as having evolved in a place of flies and damp earth...

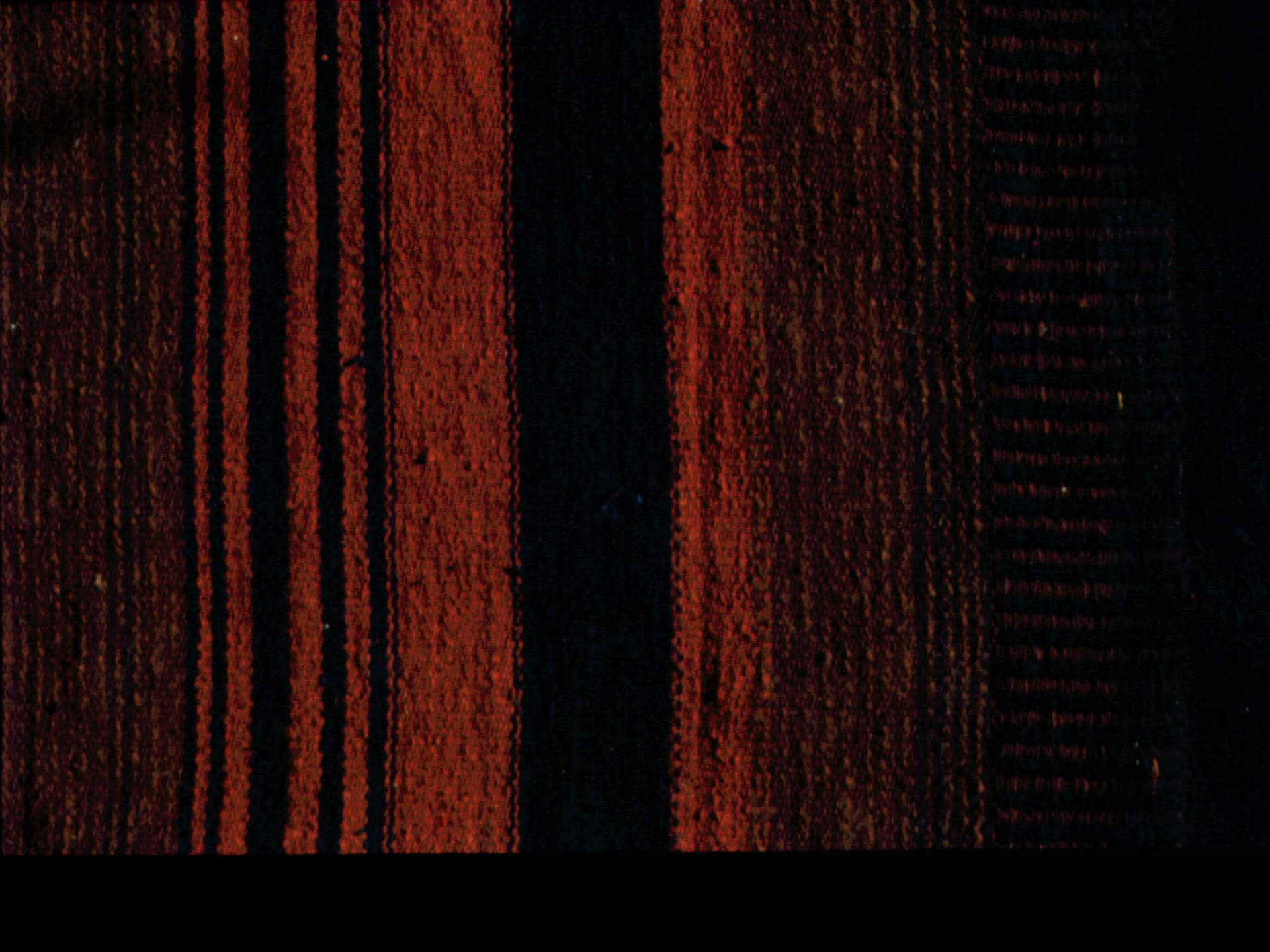


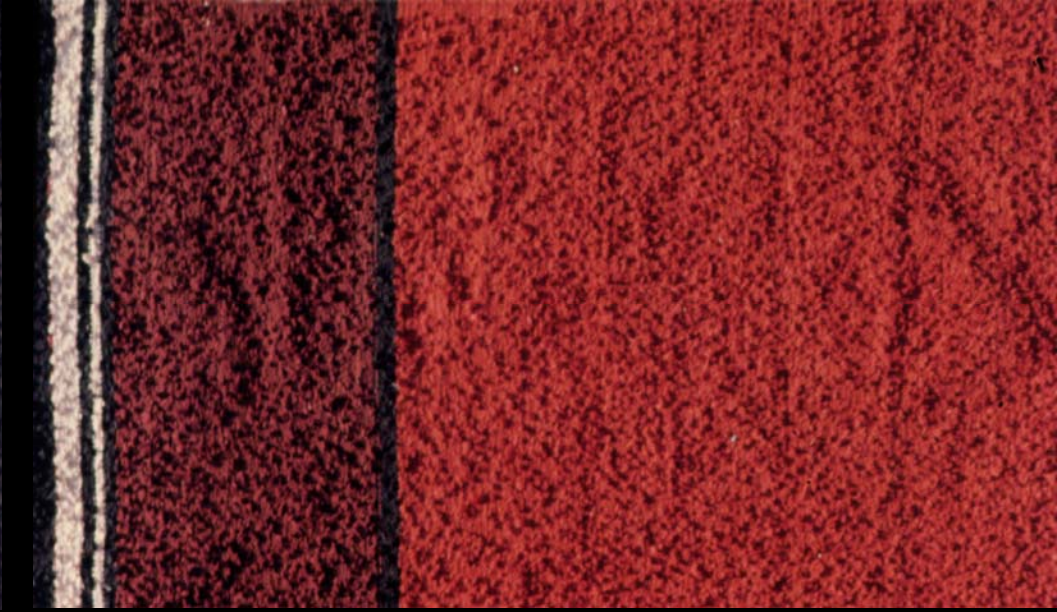
The colours, motifs and design idiom came together when the artisans asked what was special about their environment that could help establish a clear identity for their products.



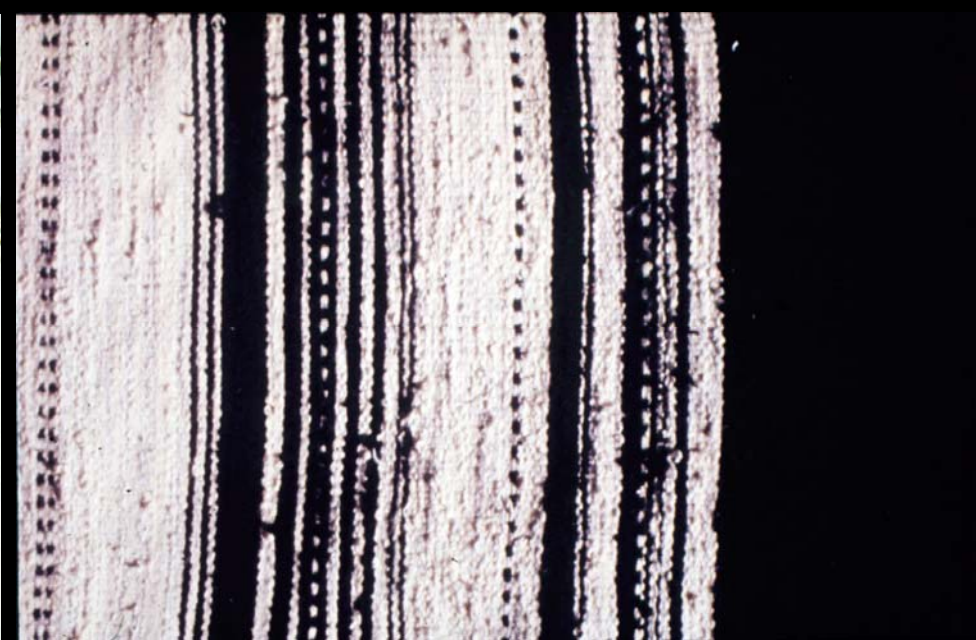
This idiom then influenced design education at NID,
partnered by Helena Peerenthupa and others there.

The artisans began to understand modern marketing and design,
emerging as artisan-designers in their own right.











1976 | 2009

Jawaja leather products were and are all **entirely hand-made** from leather that is also painstakingly treated and cured manually.

The rugs are also entirely hand-woven on looms, using hand-spun wool.



1976 | 2009



1976 | 2009



1976 | 2009



1976 | 2009



Working as a collective, the artisans alliance of Jawaja continue to learn together to deal with the challenges of self-reliant entrepreneurship.



These challenges include:

Group problem-solving



Building trust and accountability between members

dealing with the promise and complexity of mutuality in a cooperative.

What happens to debts when individual members default or leave?



Keeping financial records.
1980s



Cutting-to-measure
2009

Avoiding the old debt-traps

by locating new markets outside the control of local power structures, building the capacity to negotiate with distant clients, and locating alternative sources of finance — each issue a huge challenge in itself.



Examining stock and making collective decisions, 1970s

Quality Control, stock-taking and planning inventory



Sorting merchandize | Packaging and storage

1976

2009

JUTE
SACKS

+ POLYTHENE
BAGS

Quality Control, stock-taking and planning inventory



Counting in progress, 1976 | 2009 meeting with expert advisors at Jawaja

Developing new strategies of self-help

So how successful has the Jawaja experiment been?

A lot has changed since 1975...



Everything (in the villages) was separate before...

"Everything (in the villages) was separate before..."

Yes, we've heard so...

It's not just hearsay, it actually was so.

It (the discrimination) was very fierce, but it's no longer so.

So it isn't like that anymore?

No.

And do you feel this change has happened because of the work you do now?

Yes, social attitudes only change when everything else changes. As long as your economic condition is weak, no-one will support you..."



At a village well, passing a litmus-test for positive social change

1976 | 2009

Once barred from using certain village wells, members of lower-caste groups have acquired access to this water, scarce as it is.

People who could not afford to eat once a day now eat twice, and own houses.



At NID showrooms in the 1980s | 2009

Jawaja's distinctive products exhibit and sell today in national and global markets. Processes of management, innovation and marketing are all run by the artisans.



Those (designs) were made in 1980..

DESIGN AND INNOVATION FOR LEATHER (*Raigars*) 22 seconds

"Those designs were made in 1980 in NID,
those have been selling for a long time...
they sell a lot. We haven't changed them..."

**There is demand for those designs
even today- both abroad and in India."**

DESIGN INNOVATION FOR WEAVING (*Bunkars*) 50 seconds

Do you use the original designs?

"No, there have been many changes. Earlier we used to make plain *dhurries* and rugs. We had some designs from NID and developed these, and by changing the colour combinations we kept getting orders. Helena *behn* (sister) showed us how to make plain *dhurries*, without too many designs...

...Later, as people's tastes changed, our designs also changed. We also still use these old designs. But if someone asks, say, for another colour combi-nation, we make it for them."

An uncommon example of self-reliance through mutual learning, Jawaja has inspired individuals and organizations across the world.

"Development is about people, not about statistics."

- Ravi Matthai, The Rural University

"We were 3 young women, just out of university, eager to make a difference to rural folk. We had visited Bhal in Saurashtra, a vast wasteland affected by poverty, patriarchy and oppression of every kind. We knew about Jawaja and went to talk to Ravi Matthai. He was the only one who encouraged us to see the difficulties in Bhal as resources for change, to understand the people first and to try and understand the situation from their perspective, not ours. And then to go ahead as partners, with care and respect. After all these years, we look back. Jawaja was the seed from which we grew."

- Nafisa Barot, Utthan, India

Leading NGOs, known around the world, influenced by the Jawaja experiment include: PRADAN (India, whose founder Deep Joshi received the 2009 Magsaysay Award); Basix (Hyderabad, headed by Vijay Mahajan, an international expert in micro-finance); Utthan (led by Nafisa Barot, acknowledged for key contributions to drinking water, sanitation and human rights); The Tata-Dhan Academy (Madurai, founded by Jawaja colleague Prof. Ranjit Gupta); Dhan (started by alumni of PRADAN); the Madras Institute of Development Studies, and The Crafts Council of India, with its affiliate State Councils across India and links with the World Crafts Council.

Almost every notable experiment in craft development in India over the past years has been influenced by the Jawaja experience including Urmul, the National Institute of Design (Ahmedabad) and the design institutes that have followed it, and the Rights & Resources Group (Washington DC, where early Jawaja-volunteer Arvind Khare now works).

Wherever Jawaja volunteers have gone, they acknowledge their debt to learning from and alongside the artisans.

The Jawaja experience has been about development understood as learning from one another in an environment of mutual respect and equality: about individuals, groups, institutions, and perhaps most of all the forces of tradition and modernity meeting on a somewhat level playing field.



Crafts is a wonderful space to express this, as happened in Jawaja. But the influence extends well beyond crafts to so many efforts concerned with dignity, self-reliance, self-empowerment and livelihoods... efforts that can and must be sustained in a world changing at a pace that leaves so many with so few resources even further at the margins of 'progress'.

The Jawaja experiment was about affording more choices to those who could seldom choose, through building the capabilities and confidence to not only choose well but also to realise some of the choices made.



Since our education is lacking,

COMMUNICATING VALUE TO CUSTOMERS

23 seconds

“Since our education is lacking, we can’t explain our work to customers. They’ll buy what they understand right?”

“When we can’t explain the details, we don’t know what they understand, and what they don’t.”

Today Jawaja’s greatest challenges lie, perhaps still, in marketing their work in an increasingly competitive, English-speaking world.

MARKETING TROUBLE 40 seconds



The buyers are 500 or 1000 kilometers away

"The buyers are 500 or 1000 kilometers away and we are in the villages with few means of transport, so then how can one have direct dialogue? One doesn't even know who the exporters are or which exporter is selling what. Only the middlemen in Delhi know, and they bring people to us."

So this website you have now - you do have one don't you?

"Yes, we do."

Have you had any sales through it?

"It's been running for two years now, actually three... three years it's been, but we haven't had a single order through it."

No direct orders at all?

"No."

This is a scenario in which industrial goods and opaque chains of sellers and middlemen routinely have the effect of marginalizing small-scale crafts producers.

There is hope and optimism at home. Like millions of other artisans in India and the world over, speaking only their native languages, and relying on their hand-skills, creativity and collective strength, the many craftspeople of Jawaja face their challenging futures today.

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