

PAKISTAN'S CRAFT INDUSTRY REFLECTS THE COUNTRY'S OWN HISTORY



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Pakistan's decolonisation process began with fashion. It was in the 1950s when the country's first couturier established herself with a distinct 'Pakistani' means of dressing which was very different from 'Indian' style and a step away from 'colonial' fashion. Interestingly, while men were quick to adopt British fashion, women generally stuck to their local fabrics and style more so out of cultural norms and perhaps, the climate as well.

Sughra Kazmi established herself via the various local fabrics and embellishments as a couturier. This kickstarted the further decolonisation of local fashion. By the time the 1960s and 1970s rolled around the country had experimented plenty with Western fashion thanks to influences that came in from Iran a la Farah Diba and the infamous 'Hippie Trail' that made its way to Karachi from Afghanistan.

Street style remained very much western till the 1980s. This is when the decolonisation seeds began being sowed: starting from Tanveer Jamshed who took the Pakistani silhouette of the long tunic and baggy trousers – shalwar kameez – global via his brand Teejays with outlets in London and Paris. Locally, this was also a means of empowering women who were fighting for their rights in Pakistan and what better way than to take an item of clothing and give it an androgynous cut?

If women were expected to dress conservatively or ensure the female figure was invisible, they most certainly could but they'd also make their presence felt physically in public spaces. It was a stroke of genius. No one could question them over their clothes but yet they remained feminine in the most powerful way, through fashion.

And then there were the craft revivalists – all of them women. In Lahore, there was Sehyr Saigol who started the first original, screen printed designs and took them global via her luxury pret brand Libas.

Sehyr Saigol's impact on decolonising fashion cannot be stated enough. Not only did she start her own brand that celebrated Pakistanis abroad but also opened up the Western market for all of South Asia. While opening up Libas outlets in London, she also set up Libas the

magazine which brought forth women of colour long before Vogue did – in fact, so strong was Libas' impact it was found side by side next to Vogue.

Prior to this, celebrating South Asian fashion, Zaineb Alam in London was the first to introduce high fashion rooted in South Asia in London via her brand ZeeZees. When Sehyr Saigol and Zaineb Alam joined forces there was no stopping them. They changed the market for London and for the first time, Pakistani fashion was seen as couture and could boast of clients such as British royalty and global celebrities worldwide.

In Pakistan the revivalists continued their work. Maheen Khan, Faiza Samee, Nur Jehan Bilgrami, Bunto Kazmi and Nilofer Shahid all went out into the 'unknown' in what was still a relatively new country that was attracting personalities including Pierre Cardin and Jackie Kennedy. The impact of the revivalists is still felt today – from ancient stitches, to block printing techniques, to vegetable dyed fabric, to weaving to cuts, these women built an industry based very much on what is referred to as 'indigenous' culture.

Starting from the grassroots level and creating a nationwide industry that went global, Pakistani craft has always been at the forefront of opening up markets for South Asian fashion. It was this industry that birthed local fashion publications and pop culture, today which has gone global too.

Up until 1999, Pakistan's culture continued to decolonise itself via festivals, cultural shows and exhibitions. Pop culture culminated in an original music video for 'Khamaj' that was the peak point where Pakistani music, style, fashion and history all tied into one gorgeous package.

And then came 9/11 which plunged the country into an identity crisis, a predicament that was never resolved. In between the chaos, the craft industry was somehow sidelined and ignored. As political and economic crises grew, local consumers found themselves either filling their stomachs or easing their conscience via a reinvigorated 'Arabisation' process which was synonymous with a religious identity.

Craft was all but forgotten. Unable to grow or innovate, handicrafts relied heavily on physical exhibitions to make ends meet, a cruel fate for a labour that were reliant on this in between crop cycles all of which were contingent largely upon Nature and her mood swings. Realising this there have been efforts to revolutionise how women work and earn an income in rural areas. One case study is that of Kaarvan Crafts Foundation (KCF).

Set up in 2004 with a focus on female economic empowerment it has advocated for gender equality, understanding that if females are to be viewed as equals, men need to be addressed as well. Working at the grassroots level there is an understanding of cultural norms and practices and within those confines it has successfully mobilised and enabled more than 25,000 women across Pakistan.

In 2018, KCF set up 'aanganpk.com', an e-commerce platform that actively advocated for digital literacy for women, enabling them to earn directly by running their own e-shops. Normally digital literacy would be conducted physically in the fields where these artisans were present but COVID-19 put an end to that. On the other hand, access to urban markets was limited due to restricted travel brought on by the pandemic.

With no training and no exhibitions, craft was in a freefall situation again. The rural woman risked being left behind in a world that was rapidly changing. The solution was to bring them into the digital realm – digitally.

In 2020, for the first time rural artisans participated in a three-day virtual exhibition, sharing their journey and showcasing their handmade clothing and fabric. A whole new chapter in Pakistan's digital literacy and women's economic empowerment had commenced. From just selling their wares, artisans were opening their homes, their lives and telling their stories digitally for themselves, by themselves.

But the question of how sustainable such plans are remains to be explored. It is estimated that crafts and related employments represent a significant source of employment in Pakistan at approximately 15% of all national employment. This particular segment of the creative economy remains ignored in terms of innovation, advocacy, gender, development and legislation.

COVID-19 identified the most vulnerable of Pakistanis as the most affected – the rural woman. The pandemic brought to the fore the underlying disparities that affect women and girls which disrupted their ability to earn and have access to markets to sell their handicrafts.

Pakistan as a country was still grappling with numerous socio-economic problems and with the pandemic two stark problems reared their heads. Firstly, the lack of sustainability awareness surrounding the craft industry, which is the second means of income after agriculture; and secondly, the environmental disaster as a result of unprecedented development projects. Either way – craft or agriculture – the rural woman is suffering badly.

Sustainable growth in the craft industry is stagnant and rural lands are being turned into housing societies. Unless people are made aware of what is happening via strong a digital presence that can help connect with wider audiences, the rural woman risks being left behind.

To think Pakistani craft once opened up South Asian fashion to the world and to see it suffer like this is reflective of the country's own history.

The author is the founder of Zuka Books, a Lahore-based publishing house dedicated to fostering cultural resistance and more creative space in the literary world.

