

much larger system. Mill and factory owners produce within set time-frames and conditions or wages are secondary. If a merchant can reduce his price or speed up production then everyone involved will have to adapt to this price point or deadline. The human cost is rarely the manufacturer's priority.

In contrast handlooms offers opportunities for male and female employment. Even more than that, with the right framework it offers people the opportunity to create; at FiveP consultation takes place on an inclusive basis. Weavers can innovate, move within the production system and contribute ideas. And the whole site has been built with the weaver in mind. The loom sheds are light, airy, safe and eco-friendly. The company places weaving at the heart of a carbon neutral environment (handwoven cloth is carbon neutral, it uses no electricity, no gas and, with organic yarns, no pesticides). Water is recycled into irrigation systems: it's a sustainable system that can be replicated in other towns and villages – anywhere traditional craftsmanship needs preserving.

Given the history of India and Gandhi's championing of the khadi system – the country's route to independence – it's not surprising that proposed changes to the law stirred emotions. Handloom weaving remains an important part of Indian society. To see it decline, to see it stagnate – or worse to see it stop completely – would be like destroying the essence of India.

••• **Uthra Rajgopal, www.fivepventure.com**

Today handloom weavers struggle to compete against technologies that churn out cheap imitations of their designs. But in a few communities artisans are working to sustain their craft and satisfy the global market for culturally distinctive products. One such community is the Vankars, handloom weavers from Kutch, in the state of Gujarat, a region rich in craft. There are a variety of initiatives to help them compete in contemporary markets. Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya (KRV), a design education institute for artisans is one of them. Twenty-two weavers have graduated since it opened in 2005. On a visit to Kutch Ruth Clifford met local weavers and discussed the challenges they face and how they protect a craft threatened by modernising technologies.

Shamji Vishram Valji is the son of renowned Master Artisan Vishram Valji Vankar: along with his four brothers he runs an international business. Shamji is interested in the origin and history of his weaving tradition. He advises at a new design education institute for traditional artisans Somaiya Kala Vidya (SKV).

Ramji Maheshwari is from a community near Anjar in southern Kutch. He moved to Sumerasar Sheikh, north of Bhuj in 2001. Ramji's family have been weavers for three generations. Ramji graduated from KRV in 2008, and recently completed the SKV business postgraduate course.

Jayantilal Premji (Jenti) lives in Bhujodi. He

joined the family profession after school. The KRV course, which Jenti graduated from in 2010, helped him to develop his own business. Jenti also studied on the pilot course of SKV and took part in a project in which he collaborated with weavers from Bagalkot, on a collection that was exhibited in Mumbai.

Where do you find inspiration for new designs?

Shamji: We take inspiration from traditions. We develop designs that appeal to overseas markets, but stay firm in our traditions.

Jenti: I am inspired by our tradition and by nature. Interacting with other artisans such as printers helps to develop ideas too.

Ramji: From the market, fashion industries and changing trends. But I also take inspiration from my surroundings. This year I'm working on the theme of Bhajya Hill and fort. Last year it was "White Rann" (the salt desert in north Kutch). I learnt to develop themes at KRV – it changed my perspective.

What attracts your current customers?

Ramji: Most of my clients come from textile and design backgrounds and understand craft. They see hand weaving as an art form. They appreciate that the whole family is involved and are interested in our history.

Where does your main competition come from?

Ramji: Our main competitors are textile mills and machines who are giants. They are cheaper and faster. But machines produce a completely different quality so I don't think we