



ETHNICEASE – RECONNECTING ROOTS: THE INDIAN DIASPORA AND ARTISANS’ DIGITAL LINKAGE

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Abstract : My research focuses on an inadequate aspect of cultural commerce: the available infrastructure of the international markets fails to suffice the emotional needs of the Indians living abroad. They permanently migrate for better opportunities, but do not have access to authentic products from the homeland. On the other side, talented rural artisans (who are cut off from the overseas markets) are equipped with creative hands. To fill this gap, for the past 18 months I have been studying both sides of the disconnect and have developed EthnicEase – “not yet another e-commerce solution,” but a cultural bridge tailored specifically for diaspora-artisan commerce. The proposition is EthnicEase leverages the international network of India Post, which is left without proper utilization (a stroke of luck that came from a chance meeting with a postal official at a 2023 conference) and has region-based cultural diversity within India ethnically focused subdivision product class catalogue mapping system. I’ve built a ‘system’ through field interviews with eighty-six artisans with seventeen focus groups in three countries. It tackles pragmatic issues like the cost of shipping documents and the sometimes very human ties between the maker and the buyer. Preliminary implementation results across the three regions under test is promising: the artisans’ income has increased by 34 percent, emotional connections has been restored, and its provides a scalable model that becomes the traditional heritage culture of flowed transformed across the regions.

I. INTRODUCTION

When my uncle from New jersey overpaid nearly \$200 for a sub-par set of brass diyas that, in reality, could be purchased for a mere ₹800 in Moradabad, I realized the problem during diwali in 2022. It's mind-boggling that a talented craftsman like him, who produces exquisite brass work, capable of fetching international premiums, remains imprisoned within a local market that caps his potential earnings at ₹12,000 a month. The absurd gap between the price of authentic Indian brass work overseas and the local prices set demands in the diaspora and supply is a classic example of an economic paradox.

Sarees have been passed down from generations etched along the familial ties which makes wearing a Kanjeevaram saree not simply wearing a piece of clothing but deeper than mere fabric. Chanderi handloom sarees are not merely adorned but cherished childhood memories personified. These are some of the strong bonds within the Indian diaspora, however, the vast majority are starving for such authentic reconnections due to the ever shattered state of globalization. Genuine solutions do exist but they include countless brokers who inflate prices, skimp on authenticity, offer proxy shipping or impose extortionate delivery fees that render acquiring multiple purchases non cost effective.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on diaspora commerce shows an interesting gap between its theoretical potential and real-world practicality. In her study “Valuing Heritage” from 2021, Mehta illustrated that first-generation Indian immigrants spent 4-7% of their household budgets on cultural goods. By 35 years of age, many ‘authentically reconnecting’ second-generation Indians heritage items—a trend that outpaces parental spending. This was thought to be cultural consumption diminishing over generations, which prior migration theories suggested.

The 2023 report “International Postal Services: Reaching the Diaspora” issued by The Department of Posts is surprisingly frank. By their own admission, artisan shipments do not utilize these routes from India to the world because of agreements with the Universal Postal Union, which stands at 192 countries. Their commentary suggested “bureaucratic complexity rather than actual limitations,” comment blaming internal processes tailored to corporate shippers, which in effect blocked individual artisans from participating. Alongside my field research observations, this corroborated what I saw—artisanal craftsmen and women abandoning export attempts getting lost in bewildering documentation requirements.

Singh and Kapoor’s controversial 2022 paper “Digital Exclusion in Traditional Sectors” went against the grain with the claim that the majority of artisans have technological tools within reach but do not want to use them.

III. OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

My primary objective with EthnicEase is to create a niche ecosystem where diaspora members can transact with artisans from their hometowns through culture-driven digital interfaces. The project specifically aims at:

1. Enabling direct ethnocentric commerce between diaspora and artisans through user-friendly interfaces and shipping solutions.
2. Ensuring cultural context and human relationships intrinsic to heritage brands are negative transactions.
3. Preserving unequally distributed value by removing unneeded help but retaining needed support services.
4. Utilizing existing infrastructure, particularly the international posting services offered by India Post, to avoid creating redundant systems.
5. Empower entrepreneur skills in artisan communities through adaptable training on digital literacy and streamlined business processes.

The scope includes platform development starting from concept design to pilot implementation. Initially, we will focus on four product categories with existing diaspora demand: religious/ceremonial items, traditional textiles and clothing, shelf-stable regional foods, and handcrafted home décor. From a geographic perspective, we have identified three diverse production regions (Gujarat, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu)

IV. METHODOLOGY

I undertook this project using mixed-methods research by first performing quantitative analysis followed by ethnographic fieldwork. The discovery phase kickstarted with baseline surveys of 843 members of the diaspora within the target regions to determine their purchase patterns, preference rankings, and challenges when trying to access products from their homeland. This revealed surprising regional differences; UK-based Indians prioritized regional food items (37%) while UAE residents placed religious items first (42%)—these insights directly impacted implementations strategy.

My field team went on to conduct 17 focus groups with 142 participants from the diaspora, employing semi-structured protocols to delve into emotional ties to cultural products. These sessions yielded rich qualitative data, particularly regarding festival-linked purchases and gift-giving activities. One striking participant from London encapsulated this well: "I'm not really buying a Ganpati murti; I'm buying the feeling of being at my grandmother's house during Ganesh Chaturthi." This emotional dimension framed how we wished to position our products.

The artisan research stream entailed 86 in-depth interviews in crafts villages, purposely sampling contrasting contexts: third-generation master artisans with newcomers, traditionally organized guilds and individual practitioners, and differential prior export exposure. Instead of interviewing artisans at craft exhibitions (the standard procedure), we interviewed artisans in their workshops, observing genuine work procedures and daily difficulties. This uncovered key practical challenges missing from the literature, including how difficult it was for many to photograph shiny or complex products properly.

Interviews were supplemented with 12 participatory workshops in which artisans directly influenced platform features through cooperative prototyping. This provided rich insights—such as the requirement for voice interfaces for artisans with text literacy constraints, and geographical differences in planning horizons for production impacting stock management strategies.

Technical development was pursued in an iterative cycle with bi-weekly review cycles with continuous stakeholder input. The important integration of India Post involved widespread field testing in diverse rural environments, yielding connectivity problems that led us to add offline synchronization features—a feature not initially envisioned but of fundamental practicality.

V. SYSTEM DESIGN

The EthnicEase architecture embraces both the technical requirements and the cultural nuances uncovered in the research. After fighting with out-of-the-box e-commerce frameworks which sought to usurp standardization on our work, we crafted a bespoke regional system made up of six constituent modules, which are interlinked to one another:

The Registration and Verification module constructs asymmetric, but culturally sensitive strategies for each user group. Artisans register with Aadhaar Integrated KYC and Banking while diaspora users have flexible verification options including passport-based verification as well as community vouching systems drawn from traditional hawala networks. A passport dual approach helps maintain security while enabling respect to contextual constraints.

The Cultural Catalog system is without doubt our most radical deviation from traditional e-commerce. Products are not sorted through generic categories, instead they are organized through a nested cultural taxonomy which captures regional nuances (for example distinguishing Pattachitra traditions across Odisha and Bengal) and festival-specific groupings. Every listing contains multimedia profiles of the artisans that produced the pieces, footage of the production processes and cultural context of usage. Many did not expect "heritage certification" to become such a roaring success. This a chain of knowledge where renowned master craftspeople affirm the authenticity of the pieces.

The Transaction Processing module handles the difficult reality of cross-border payments with multi-currency options, transparent conversion, and automatic compliance with overseas remittance laws. We added traditional banks and other payment channels after finding out that about 24% of rural artisans use non-bank payment systems.

With regard to the Logistics Coordination system, perhaps the most remarkable is its innovation as it focuses on sophisticated integration with India Post's Electronic Data Interchange. After months of lengthy negotiations and numerous field tests, we created APIs that interfaced with their international shipping systems, automating customs documentation, delineating packaging protocols, and providing comprehensive tracking services from origin to destination. This brought us great technical disadvantage because we had to work with old SOAP services instead of REST APIs, but the value gained—access to postal routes, even to small towns abroad—was phenomenal.

The Communication Platform offers translation with contextual cultural awareness that takes into account the fact that many artisans are speakers of the region's languages and diaspora members are literate but don't write their mother tongue fluently. In order to resolve frequent miscommunication, we added culture and dialect translation and added context in post-editing after user tests were completed.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION AND TESTING

Implementation was performed in well-planned stages of fourteen months, beginning with the development of core technologies and security testing. Rather than following routine launch procedures, we employed a "long soft-launch" strategy involving deliberate capacity restrictions to ensure system stability and appropriate support to early users.

Artisan training started with 34 in-village workshops, held in collaboration with local craft development offices. Workshops were three-day affairs, covering digital product documentation, pricing, shipping, and customer management. We soon realized that traditional training material was not working; after a disappointing result from a first workshop, we redesigned all material using region-specific visual storytelling methods instead of written text. The new process increased levels of understanding exponentially—completion rates rose from 47% to 89%.

A surprise challenge was encountered in product photography. Our original plan relied on artisans to photograph themselves, but early attempts resulted in inconsistent shots that watered down product appeal. We adopted a hybrid strategy: providing minimal photography training with limited lighting techniques, supplemented by periodic visits from professional photographers for signature products. This compromise was a trade-off between scalability and quality requirements.

The diaspora interface was revised five times after user testing, with extensive revision of the cultural categorization system. Initial academic efforts at regional categorization were overly complex; festival-based primary organization with regional sub-filtering was employed in the final deployment—the manner in which diaspora users naturally thought about their needs in test sessions.

The integration with India Post presented our greatest implementation challenge. Despite negotiating API access, rural connectivity issues frequently disrupted shipment processing. We developed an offline preparation process for documents with intelligent synchronization upon reconnect—a capability not originally conceived but critical for rural use. The partnership ultimately proved successful, with 94% of pilot shipments being automatically processed without human intervention, with 12-day average delivery times to the US, 9 days to the UK, and 7 days to the UAE.

Live testing started with small batches (45 artisans, 120 diaspora users) and grew incrementally over four months. We tracked 27 performance indicators such as transaction success rates, shipping milestone compliance, support ticket counts, and satisfaction. Technical issues were mostly anticipated roadblocks such as payment gateway timeouts and the occasional sync failure, but the most significant issues were cultural: conflicting expectations regarding production schedules and packaging design necessitated the creation of clear communication templates.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The four-month experiment produced quantitative data as well as surprising qualitative observations that have influenced our comprehension of diaspora-artisan trade. The platform enabled 1,842 completed transactions with an average value of \$78.50, with clear buying spikes ahead of major holidays—Diwali purchases were ordered 60+ days in advance whereas local celebrations were ordered with shorter time horizons of 30-45 days.

From the producer's perspective, participation resulted in a 34% mean increase in income, with particularly good returns for strongly culturally differentiated product categories—Madhubani artists received a 47% premium on domestic market prices, while general textile producers received modest 18-22% returns. Much more significant than direct monetary return was stated increased business predictability; 72% of producers stated that pre-order trends enabled improved material availability and production planning.

The direct buyer-producer relationship provided interesting social returns beyond our first hypothesis. Most diaspora buyers started sustained interactions with particular makers, ordering custom variations and submitting photos of items in use in cultural ceremonies. Some makers mentioned using these interactions to build more significant opportunities, such as invitations to exhibitions and bespoke commissions. This spontaneous community formation indicates possible sustainable relationship trade beyond transactional interactions.

The most conclusive finding supports our core hypothesis: items with rich cultural background and artisanal history sold for 23% more than similar products with bland descriptions. This "authenticity premium" profitably accrues to producers while meeting diaspora consumers' demand for meaningful connection—precisely the market failure EthnicEase sought to remedy.

There were some limitations: rural connectivity issues sometimes interrupted artisan communication in spite of offline features; seasonal production patterns led to inventory management issues that our present system does not manage as efficiently; and some craft categories that needed tactile assessment had poorer online conversion rates. These results indicate digital platforms perform best in hybrid models perhaps complemented by periodic physical exhibitions or augmented virtual product experiences.

VIII . Conclusion

EthnicEase demonstrates the effectiveness of careful digital intervention in tackling, simultaneously, diaspora cultural disconnection and artisan economic marginalization—issues that previously were tackled as separate fields with separate solutions. The success of the project warrants three basic principles that might underlie similar initiatives:

Second, cultural commerce is fundamentally distinct from conventional e-commerce; sites flourish when they preserve context and human interaction rather than maximizing transactional efficiency in a vacuum. The premium price diaspora consumers are willing to pay for authentic, contextualized products guarantees that cultural value exceeds merchandise value.

Secondly, existing infrastructure—above all postal networks—actually can enable world artisan trade when suitable digital interfaces bridge institutional complexity. Rather than developing duplicative systems, future efforts should also find and utilize existing underutilized assets already reaching target communities.

Third, direct consumer-producer relations produce multi-dimensional value beyond price gains. The building of long-term relationships, tailored commissions, and community development is evidence of the ways that cultural commerce platforms are capable of precipitating larger-scale social connections if well-designed.

Though encouraging, our findings identify areas in need of further improvement. Future versions must correct seasonal production management, enhance virtual product experience capabilities, and improve more advanced demand prediction tools. The long-term implications of the platform on craft preservation, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and diaspora cultural identity maintenance are worth longitudinal studies beyond our current horizon.

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