

The last glassmakers of Kapadwanj

Parth Shastri | TNN | Updated: Aug 19, 2018, 9:50 IST

KAPADWANJ: The razzledazzle of Navratri, the longest dance festival of Gujarat, is incomplete without thousands of tiny mirrors embroidered on chaniya-cholis of lovely lasses dancing to the dhols. Likewise, the famed mirror-wall artwork in Rajasthan homes owes its thousand reflections to this small town in central Gujarat.

Shishgars are the last custodians of the art of making lead-coated mirrors using a 450-year-old technique

Kapadwanj, located some 60 km east of Ahmedabad, is Gujarat's glass town, with a mammoth 300 units manufacturing lead-coated mirrors to adorn garments and homes in western India, a century and half ago.

Today, the Shishgar family helmed by Bashir (67) and son Vasim (30) remains the last custodians of the ancient art of making lead-coated mirrors using a 450-year-old technique.

"The home of Shishgar family in Kapadwanj is the only place where one can study the traditional furnace and glass making technique which has remained unaffected by modernity. Records show how lead-coated mirrors made in Kapadwanj were used extensively in European churches and palaces of Rajasthan. Experts also compare the technique employed here with the one practiced in Europe several centuries ago," says Dr Alok Kumar Kanungo, assistant research professor at IIT Gandhinagar.

Dr Kanungo has conducted extensive research in glass making processes in India and abroad, has documented Kapadwanj as a unique centre that reflects centuries of Indian craftsmanship.

Artisans keep alive a glowing tradition

We employ wood and coal to run the furnace and achieve the temperature of 900 degrees Celsius to melt the glass. Earlier, silica with minerals was used for making glass but we use recycled glass as raw material," says Bashir.

As per Kanungo, the glass is melted at a very high temperature of 900 degrees Celsius after which blowpipes are used to make sphere of 1.5 feet diameter.

"It is a fascinating process as as artisans continue make spheres with clockwork precision. While Kapadwanj apart from other centers is the lead-coating which is done at a precise time and temperature to ensure it gives the perfect coating," he said.

Vasim Shishgar, said that the primary driver of business is demand for aabhla (circular coated mirrors) used for embroidery in different parts of Gujarat such as Kutch.

"Use of these mirrors in interior designing has provided a new lease of life to the business. Majority of the demand is from Rajasthan. Depending on the order, we make tinted glasses in blue, green, yellow, silver or gold. However, the competition has become stiff from China that supplies the glass at less than half the price with inferior quality," he said.

Vasim's elder brother has already deserted glass making to take up farming as full time profession.

The burden of carrying the family's legacy forward now rests on Vasim. "We will do our best to keep it alive," said Bashir Shishgar.

"The government of Andhra Pradesh has supported the glass bead makers by making it a rule to present the beads as a memento to the guests to support the fledgling industry. Similar practice in Gujarat might help the artisans," said Kanungo.