

A Case Study on Design: Handcraft of *Gulabi Meenakari* from Banaras

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Abstract: The city of Banaras also known as Varanasi or Kashi is typically famous as spiritual and cultural capital of the world. The city has history of practicing several materials based hand crafts since time older than 4000 years. During ancient times crafts travelled from one geographical location to the other and lately group of artisans settled in some places as clusters. These at present are termed as “craft clusters” as indicated by the government of India. One such handcraft cluster is *Gulabi Meenakari* located in *Sadar Tehsil* of Banaras district, Uttar Pradesh. A case study has been carried out following action research methodology on an artisan having authorized user number practicing the craft. The study was focused on solving design problems thereby improving economy. After the detailed study of the case and product development; it has been found that change in product designs with its existing colors, brought novelty to the range. These newly designed products were presented to the set of consumers including domestic and international tourists and retailers. The result shows that 24 % consumers found its product composition as excellent and 39 % as very good. More over total 65% of consumers found products suitably priced. 97% retailers agreed to the fact that the new products were functional and can be used for the given purpose. This eventually may lead to the better economic gain for these artisan community.

Keywords: Banaras, Craft clusters, Enamels, *Gulabi meenakari*, Handcrafted, Silver metal.

1. Introduction

The city of Banaras achieved its eminence on a religious and cultural map of India from Vedic times. Since time immemorial Banaras is a world-famous centre for textiles. City of Banaras along with eastern Uttar Pradesh region has also been place of origin for several crafts and textiles. Recently The Hindu newspaper published a news titled as “4,000-year-old crafts village unearthed near Varanasi” during month of February 2020. The excavations are done by Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Banaras Hindu University (BHU). The expert of the team Mr. A K Dubey stated that on the basis of the surface materials it can be said that the structures and crafts found there are anywhere between 3500 to 4000 years old. Even today city has more than 22 handcrafts being practiced in the district and nearby geographical areas. Out of these, several crafts have already been protected under geographical indication (GI) registry. One of such craft is *Gulabi Meenakari* which is an art of surface ornamentation on silver metal with specific type of enamels. This craft involves study of metallurgy and material sciences along with design.

As reported by Uttar Pradesh tourism department statistics, total 6447775 Indian and 350000 foreign tourists visited district of Banaras during the year 2019¹. There is great possibility that such tourist visitors may procure “cultural products” created by “local” artisans leaving an emotional connect. UNSECO has also advocated that it is completely required that cities develop their own creative market and economies on the basis of culture based products for their sustainable survival in future².

The handicraft of *Gulabi Meenakari* seem to have enormous possibility to be developed across craft based fashion consumer products and turn into a trend setter. Viewing at world fashion history since 11th century onwards; it was found that the five fashion capitals from the past namely Tokyo, New York, London, Milan, Paris been able to set new trends around product categories due to prominent designers of the given period as well as imperial families of the stated countries³. There is an urgent need to create new enterprises to design and innovate products worth for the contemporary market requirements.

Across the country there has been relentless decline in the number of artisans practicing not only *Gulabi Meenakari* but other handicrafts as well. Specially after several rounds of Nationwide lockdown post Covid-19 epidemic 2020 onwards, artisans found extremely hard to sustain their livelihood thru craft sales. This is possibly due to lack of many other set of skills other than craftsmanship which are precisely required to retain craft businesses such as new designs, concept and story based product branding, appropriate use of digital marketing strategy and many more. Due to recent dynamics of the global market changes, situation for artisans is even more critical and livelihood threatening. Therefore, products suitable for new consumer behavior and usage is required to be designed and created. If artisans keep on producing same style of traditional products it is going to be difficult to sustain their sales. Every coming seasons, consumers may not find their products relevant anymore. It is responsibility of each designer to preserve and modernize our age old heritage and revive handicrafts. If not so, our hand crafts may be wiped out entirely over a period of time.

2. Review of literature

The craft acquired its IPR (Intellectual property rights) protection and GI status in the year 2015, craft logo is shown in the figure 1. This legally safeguards interest of the craft community and therefore trade benefits.



Fig. 1

GI Logo Banaras *Gulabi Meenakari* craft

Review of literature has been arranged on the lines of craft's history, type of designs, techniques across Indian subcontinent and Banaras in specific. Along with design research, detailed scientific study of enamels, raw materials and metals was also made as other part of this research process. Besides these various Micro Small and Medium size units involved in *Gulabi Meenakari* trades and global fashion forecast were also studied before finalising new design concepts.

2.1 History of handicraft using technique of meenakari

Reneowned historian of Indian art Ananda Kentish Muthu Coomaraswamy interpreted that handvraft of meenakari existed during Indus valley civilization period⁴. Moreover, as reported by a famous jewelry blog PristineFire; people from Indus valley civilisation were probably the first one to practice art and craft of jewelry making and from there it went to several parts of the globe.They knew craft and workmanship using metals like silver, gold, copper, bronz and many other materials suitable for making of necklace, bangles etc⁵.

Another blogger such as Reena Ahluwalia have reported several physical evidences of *meenakaari* craft across Indian subcontinent museums since 16th century onwards. Several International mueusms also have samples of meenakari products which are primarily transported from India such as Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The craft of meenakari across Indian sub continent differed in style, color palette, techniques involved and mostly prepared for the elites and royalities.



Fig. 2

Meenakari on gold, A dish with elaborate detailing, 17th century, Mughal India
Source: State Hermitage Museum at Blog by Reena Ahluwalia

This dish as shown in figure 2 was supposedly presented by Iranian Ruler Nadir-Shah during an ambassadorial mission to the Russian Imperial Court in the year1741. Also figure 3 depicting royale decorative trim usually for nobles⁶.



Fig. 3

A decorative trim used for Turban. 1700-1750.
Source: V&A Museum

Evidences are found that in Indian subcontinent Kashmir, Gujrat (Kutch), Multan, Delhi, Jaipur, Banaras, Hyderabad, Lucknow, Pratapgarh etc were the main centers of meenakari. The colors, techniques used, and type of products varied place to place⁷.

A thesis written titled “Artisans and Craftsmen in 18th Century Jaipur” written by Kamal Farhat have talked about *meenakars* (enamel workers). says that jaipur has been one of the best ancient school of the craft. Some of the products made were various articles of jewellery. It also mentions that along the enamelling; art of inlaying and engraving were also used to decorate product surfaces⁸.

“Arts and Crafts of Uttar Pradesh in Eastern Study in Various Centers during Post Independence Era A Critical Study” by Sana from Aligarh Muslim university have talked about various products made by Gulabi Meenakari. Researcher has made observations about down fall of the Gulabi Meenakari craft of Banaras such as craft being too intricate and intensive hence very expensive, and the products are just made only for very special occasions and lack of new techniques and tools. These reasons are worth reworking on the craft and making products for day today life and easy designs⁹.

2.2 Meenakari product designs in other parts of the world

Various physical samples of *meenakari* has been found from other countries as well. But their visual aesthetics and techniques differed from products found in Indian subcontinent. Countries like Japan, China, France, Russia, Austria and many more¹⁰.

**Fig.4**

A dish from Iran made by meenakari on ceramic.
Source: Enamels of the world, 1700-2000: The Khalili collections.

Artisans from Iran as displayed above in figure 4 used bright tones of blue, green, red, yellow tones of meena on ceramic base used symmetrical geometric designs.



Fig. 5

Dish design with scalloped edge: From Ming dynasty China, early 15th century.

Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

Products found in various parts of ancient China as in figure 5 were usually made by using cloisonné enamel which was a very ancient technique of coloring metals.

2.3 Significance of design and innovation

One of the research made by two authors Bilge Mutlu and Alpay Er have argued that design innovation plays an important role in the competitive strategy of a company. They accomplished that 'design innovation' has potential to close the theoretical gap between the design literature and the literature on innovation and economics. Furthermore, its practical applications promise organizations to have long term benefits along with the advantage of more meaningfully and satisfactorily responding the changing consumer needs by design¹¹.

After a detailed survey with artisans, e-shops, souvenir shops at hotels in Banaras, Google search engine etc. on *Gulabi Meenakari* products, it is observed that everywhere few similar looking style of products were found which may fall under souvenir, artifacts, show pieces, jewelry products. It is also noticed that such products are quite repetitive in its visual appearance and application and do not get modified season after season. These similar looking products are being sold by artisans, traders, jewelry shops, e-stores etc. therefore have very cutthroat prices and less and fewer profit margins left for artisans. This is forcing artisan community to live for almost nothing. Artisans have world class skill set but do not have reasonable idea about market tendencies, fashion trends and theme based products for various life occasions etc. They hardly able to sell direct to consumers or buyers. Therefore, there is an immense scope and requirement to design and develop products for today's generations' flavour and life styles.

3. Methodology and Action Research

The main objective of the research was to establish link between product design innovation, therefore better consumer acceptance henceforth economic gain of the artisans.

The most contemporary researches in the creative industry are devoted to examine whether an action or manipulation causes some outcome or result. Change in the product has to be specific and has to be carried out with special context to appropriate design brief i.e. target population and market, pricing suitable for the select segment, forecast tendencies, consumer attitude and behavior etc. One independent variable is design. The other dependent variables are price, quality of raw material type of construction. Here change in design means change in type of aesthetics. The aesthetics has to be decided based on designers personal style as well as market tendencies or fashion forecast indications.

The set of actions carried out here are supposed to support, refute, or validate the given research objective and hypothesis. Set of surface ornamentation techniques of the *gulabi meenakari* craft needs to be chosen accordingly in order to realize “Banaras handicraft look” for the select occasions.

One small size unit producing gulabi meenakari products from District Banaras was selected for the case study in order to conduct the action involved. Name of unit and artisan is “Kunj Bihari Singh”. Unit is named after artisan’s name. He is the Only Artisan having Authorized User Number issued by Office of controller general of patents, designs and trademarks which is a statutory protection under Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal trade under the Ministry of commerce and industry, Government of India as mentioned on their website.

Artisan Shree Kunj Bihari Singh is winner of national award for the year 2015 by Development Commissioner, Handicrafts, Ministry of textiles; and several other and state level awards. And have a family history of practicing craft since 17th century till date.





As reported by several artisans verbal set of corporate accessories and gifting were found the most selling set of products even during Covid-19 period. Since action research is a self evaluative process. Researcher, artisans and other stake holders were involved to evaluate the outcome of the exercise. A detailed discussion were made prior fresh product design developments in relation to consumer behavior, ever changing market scenario also affected by global fashion trends. Stakeholders involved concluded that corporate gifting and mementos etc had the utmost potential to fetch orders and make considerable amount of earnings. Therefore product category of table top accessories consisting of paen stand, pair of paper pins, paper weight and organisational flag stand which can be used by consumers for themselves, as souvenir or gifting.

Prior to final design innovations and developments, gulabi meenakari craft based forms and textures were experimented. Domestic market and brand study in the segment of handcrafted gulabi meenakari products was carried out. More over international fashion forecast direction in the category of handcrafted product lines were also refred in detail. Summary and essance of all these three researches were incorporated during process of design development.

3.1 Market tendencies observed in gulabi meenakari product designs during 2019 to 2021

In order to study existing product design tendencies in the market, following sources were accessed from 2019 to 2021. The sources referred here are the ones who sell craft based products.

TABLE 1
Category of products being sold currently thru various selling platforms.
Curetted during the year 2019-2021

SL. No	Category of the seller	Product image	Product details
1	<u>e-stores</u>		Product: Ganesha Prices at e-stores were ranging between ranging from INR 1100 to INR 18000 depending on total weight of silver and workmanship.
2	U.P. Cottage Emporium, leading local jewelry brick-mortar stores, local traders all from Banaras.		Product: Dancing Peacock Prices in these stores were ranging from INR 1100 up to 1 lac and base metal silver
3	<u>Artisan</u> Shree Kunj Bihari Singh, National award winner Son of <i>Shilp guru</i> award winner Mr Mohan Prasad Verma from Banaras		Product: Ambari haathi Prices were Ranging from INR1100 to INR 2,60,000 or more depending on silver weight, workmanship etc. Base Metal Silver
4	<u>Jewellery Brands</u> CARATLANE- A Tanishq partnership Lotus range dsigns Curated on 30/9/2020		Product: Lotus Blossom Diamond Stud Earrings along with primary packaging Base metal: Set in 18 Karat yellow gold(4.55 g) with diamonds (0.08 Carat) Price: INR 37,965 Not gulabi meenakari from Banaras but gives illusion of the same, designed and manufactured at Jaipur

Several products from each seller category i.e. e-stores; brick-mortar stores and traders; artisans and brands were referred. It was observed that other than the brand CARATLANE; all designs were relatively similar in visual appearance, had similar color palette, product lines were almost same such as Ganesha, Peacock, elephant etc. It was also spotted that products found at Sl. No 1 to 3 in the Table 1 were mostly meant for showcase as decoration.



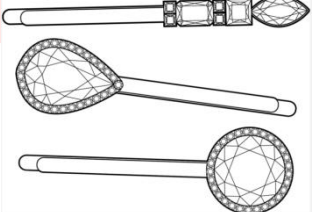
3.2 Fashion forecast study

Latest forecast for fashion consumer products under the categories of accessories, interior decor, materials etc. were made from varied authentic sources such as international forecast agencies WGSN(worth global style network), newspaper archives, social media, national international trade fairs. These sources were studied for the years 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022.

It was discovered during fashion forecast study that several tendencies such as concern for material hygiene and well being properties such antibacterial material and finishes were dominating across varied product lines¹².

TABLE 2

Fashion forecast study: accessories, interior decor, materials

Sl. No	Observation	Brand Year Source	Key fashion forecast direction
1		Brand: Saus chef Year 2021-22 Source: WGSN	Antibacterial Materials available in nature Forms and finishes inspired from traditional craftsmanship
2		Brand: Lee Savage Spring/Summer 2021 Source: WGSN	Silver replacing gold, geometric cuts
3		Brand: PeaceOnyou Spring/ Summer 2021 Source:presjewelry.com	Geometric cuts

Accessories, show pieces, decor etc designs were observed using Multi coloured stones in geometric cuts.

Other report states archival and heirloom influences on products and reviving craftsmanship¹³.

3.3 Study on Indian cultural context and sources inspiration for handicraft products

It is quite popular amongst indian artisans that they have been taking inspiration from surrounding environment and cultural context. The main sources of inspirations are flora and foliage, lotus, parrot, temples, frog, eagle, tortoise, ganesha, sarswati and several others. Artisans across varied handicrafts used these figurines as stylised, ornamented or abstract and simplified forms and silhouettes. Amongst all such design inspiration components, varied forms of parrots were most frequently found in several material based handicrafts in indian sub-continent such as textiles, pottery, metals, wood etc.



Fig. 6

Archieval reference of meenakari 17th century

Source: reenaahluwalia.com

Model of parrot portrayed in figure 6 is from Hyderabad, Circa 1775-1825 designed using green and white enamels along with precious stones.

There is mention of parrots in indian literature, art form, life rituals. In the Indian culture parrots have its significance during rituals such as marriages, are most revered in Vedas, Puranas, and in art forms etc. Several Hindu goddesses for instance Kamakshi at Kanchipuram and Meenakshi of Madurai also have associations with parrots¹⁴.

Besides these it was also found that Indian artisans created master craft peices using precious stones with geometric cuts. Products made with geometric cuts used to be accessories and ornamentals, jewelry, show pieces etc. One such master piece was a turban ornament as shown below in figure 7.



Fig. 7

Turban ornament, emerald and diamond in geometric cuts, Mid 18th century

Source: reenaahluwalia.com

3.4 Design and Construction of new *Gulabi Meenakari* products for the year 2021-22

Two concept stories were created in order to achieve two distinct visual appearances. The early adopters for such products may be the people with high net worth individuals (HNWI) with a desire to experience hand-crafted luxury segment, stylish life style products and also willing to pay for the same. Price segment considered was premium to luxury section.

Two visual inspiration theme boards were created along with the key words observed during trend researches from diverse sources. Throughout designing and prototyping stages, researcher made lot of discussions on its scientific and production aspects has been made along with the artisans; some changes in designs were made as per scientific behavior of the materials involved to make the product more appealing and functional.

Main theme : Preserve India

Sub theme 1 : Archival and historic reference : Parrot in the Garden

Sub theme 2 : Diamond-faceted and stone cut shapes of jewellery : Geometromy

Some Archival and historic reference plates for product designing for sub-theme 1 as “ Parrot in the Garden“



Figures left to right: Fig. 8, Fig. 9, Fig. 10

Central theme: Preserve India : **Sub-theme 1:** “ Parrot in the Garden“ : Some of the design reference images:

Fig. 8 : Gulabi Meenakari craft from artisan Kunj Bihari Singh work shop.

Fig. 9 : Plum headed Indian parrot (ebird.org).

Fig. 10: Brand Y/Project at WGSN report- “Wedding Season S/S 20: Jewellery Design Capsule”.

Archival product reference images from gulabi meenakari craft as showed in figure 8 and figure 9 along with fashion tendencies as presented in figure 10, varied types of Indian parrot’s, their mood and postures were captured while designing for the theme “Parrot in the Garden“.



Figures left to right: Fig. 11, Fig. 12, Fig. 13

Source: Kunj Bihari Singh work shop.

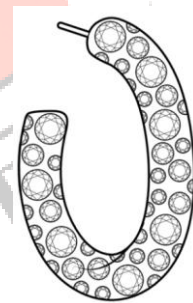
Enamel colors used from Gulabi meenakari handcraft for **Sub-theme 1 “Parrot in the Garden “:**

As displayed above figure 11 and figure 12 correspondingly are meena colors in blue translucent and white opaque. Further as depicted in Figure 13; Painting colors used to decorate the products are tones of black, blue, green and pink all applied on opaque white meena base.



Figures left to right: Fig. 14, Fig. 15
Sub-theme 1 “Parrot in the Garden “
 Handcrafted by artisan Kunj Bihari Singh

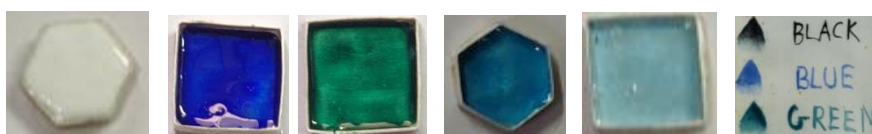
Flag stand for any organization; institution or country is shown in figure 14 which has maximum height x width x length is 16 x 8 x 16 centimeters respectively. Further figure 15 is a pair of paper pin to hold bunch of papers/files together and total pin height along with head is 4.5 centimeters.



Figures left to right: Fig. 16, Fig. 17, Fig. 18, Fig. 19

Central theme: Preserve India : **Sub theme 2:** Diamond-faceted and stone cut shapes of jewellery: **Geometromy** some of design reference images.

The inspiration for the Sub-theme 2 as “Geometromy“ were derived from various archival as well as fashion forecast informants such as Hyderabad Nizam’s jewellery exhibited by National Museum Delhi figure 16, Jewelry piece from the Brand Anabela Chan figure 17, Clutch in silver metal from the Brand Lee Savage Figure 18 and Statement ear ring suggested by WGSN(Figure 19).



Figures left to right: Fig. 20, Fig. 21, Fig. 22, Fig. 23, Fig. 24, Fig. 25

Source: Kunj Bihari Singh work shop.

Enamel colors used from Gulabi meenakari handcraft for **Sub-theme 2: Geometromy**
 Enamel Colors:

As shown above, meena colors used are white opaque figure 20, blue translucent figure 21, green translucent figure 22, translucent greenish blue figure 23 and opaque greenish blue figure 24. In addition to this painting colors used were tones of black, blue, green on opaque white meena base figure 25.

All these products for both the themes were made only in silver metal with the purity of 99.99% and for surface ornamentation vitreous enamel (meena and paint) colors were used.



Figures left to right: Fig. 26, Fig. 27

Sub theme 2: inspiration from Diamond-faceted and stone cut shapes of jewellery: Geometromy
Handcrafted by artisan Kunj Bihari Singh.

Paper weight shown in figure 26 has maximum width x height as 7.5 x 5.5 centimeters respectively. Pen stand shown in figure 27 has maximum height x width as 11.5 x 3.5 centimeters correspondingly.

4. Research Findings

In order to assess' product acceptability and marketability of the two range designs, set of questions were prepared separately for consumers and retailers. Eventually both set of respondents were shown range of products in person, in the room light and they were allowed to have sensory feel of the products and then asked to answer questions given by researcher.

Set of 100 consumers comprising of NRIs (Non resident Indians), international and domestic tourists, high class well-travelled business men and women and "A" grade central government officials from Banaras district) were contacted for responses.

Another set of respondents comprising of 60 Retailers as E-store managers, Traders, artisans selling from their social media portals, prestigious hotel souvenir gift shop managers were asked to comment on various aspects of the new range design prototypes.

A crisp summary of the responses is presented as follows:

Consumers’ responses:

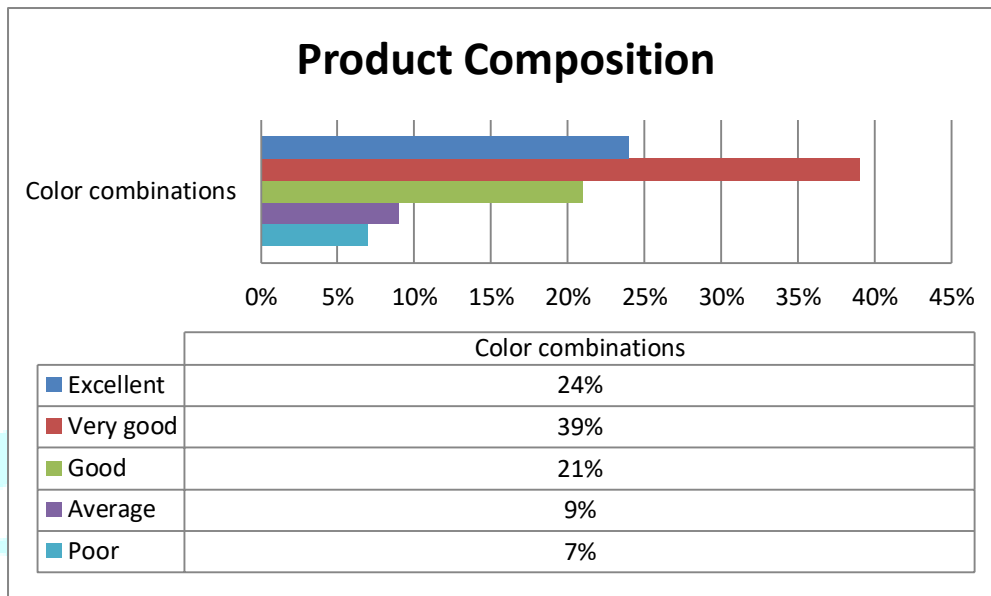


Fig. 28: Consumers’ responses regarding product composition and aesthetics

As shown in figure 28 when asked about product composition Embellishment coordination/fusion, color combination 24% found as excellent and 39% consumers found as very good. Respondents were asked about the sensory appeal involving color combination, and over all aesthetic composition of the products.

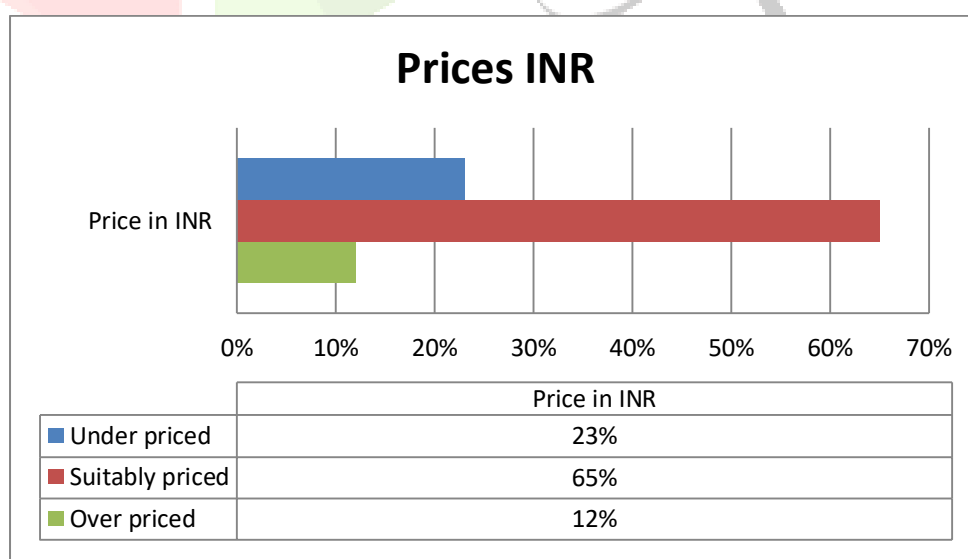


Fig. 29: Consumers’ responses towards suitability of product prices

As depicted in figure 29; respondents were asked about appropriateness of prices total 65 % said products are suitably priced and 23 % found under priced. Product designs prices were ranging from INR 34000 to INR 1, 45, 000.

Retailers' responses:

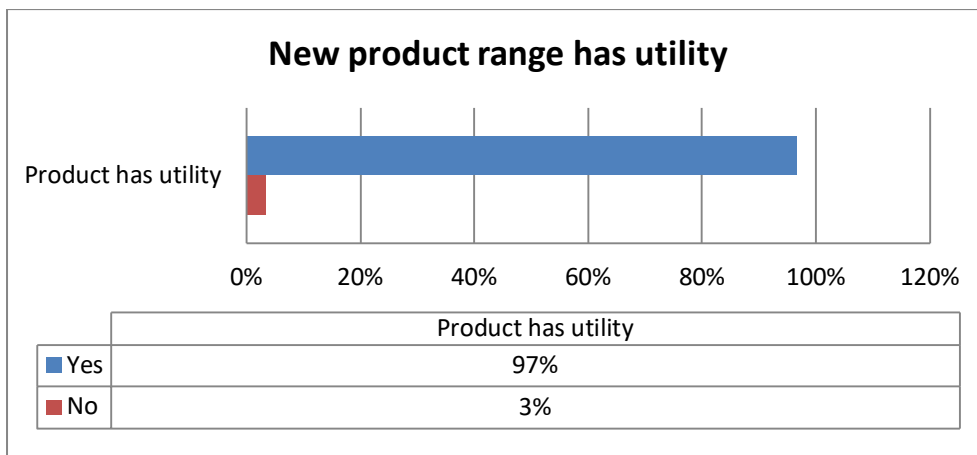


Fig. 30: whether new range design have utility as carporate gifting etc.

As shown in the figure 30; total 97% retailers agreed to the fact that the new products were functional and can be used for the given purpose. They agreed that new range design is very much appropriate for carporate gifting, souvenir etc.

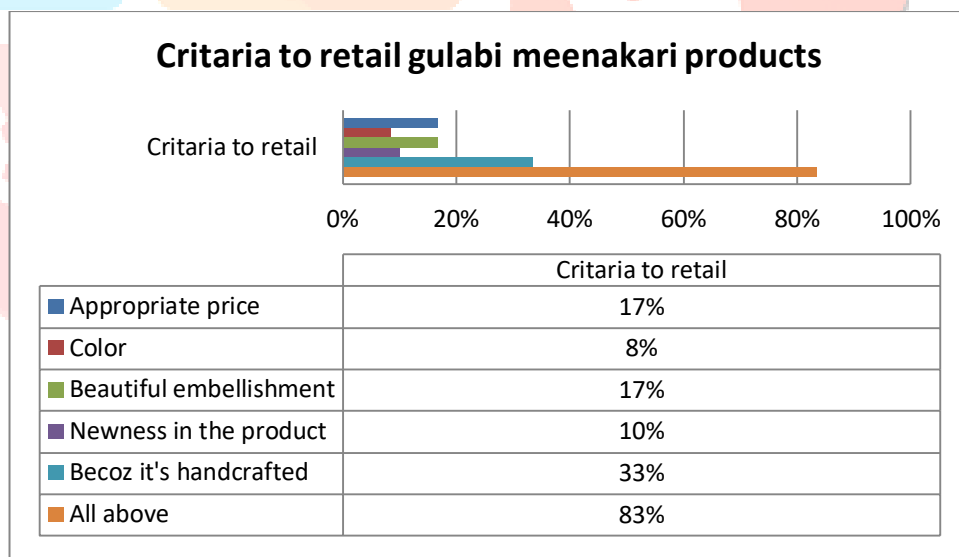


Fig. 31: Various critaria to retail gulabi meenakari products.

Figure 31 depicts that whall critaria gulabi meenakari products are sold for. Different traders had distinctive reasons to sell gulabi meenakari products. They countered that it is not just one reason to sell these handcrafted products but there are several factors which enfluence consumers' decesions to make final purchase. As consumers have diverse reasons to procure gulabi meenakari products depending on their personal priorities and palate etc.

5. Conclusions

As found during reactions by two set of consumers that change in product designs certainly adding to its better sale which helps to preserve the craft. Therefore, it seems there is possibility of selling the pieces in larger quantities. It is possible to create aesthetically appealing visual and sensory textures by using existing available colors with artisans. Incorporating latest trends is also possible in the handcrafted products of gulabi meenakari. For the future it is suggested that artisans of gulabi meenakari have design and innovation partners who could come up with products more suitable for the current consumer lifestyles and select target audience so that focus and purpose of design is not misplaced and ambiguous. Experienced designers may add context to each product and its relevance during usage. Further researches may also be conducted on its scientific and metallurgical aspects which may help during further innovations. Moreover further work on the craft may also focus on artisans wages, training and awareness workshops so that it helps to retain their livelihood.

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