

The last glassmakers of Kapadwanj

The Art Adorning Palaces, European Churches Now Confined To 1 Family

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Kapadwanj: The razzle-dazzle 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.

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



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

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.

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Story 1- Title: The last glassmakers of Kapadwanj
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Story 2- Title: Looking through the glass of ages (Pg. no. 2)

Artisans keep alive a glowing tradition

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Kutch.

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 spheres of 1.5 feet diameter.

"It is a fascinating process 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 aabha (circular coated mirrors) used for embroidery in different parts of Gujarat such as

"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.

Kapadwanj And Its Artisans Emerged On The National Map In The 17th Century

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As one approaches the sole surviving glass factory of Kapadwanj, located on the eastern end of the town, the first feature that strikes one is the heat. An army of artisans work around the clock during the peak season ahead of Navratri festivities to meet the surge in demand. For the uninitiated, glassmaking is a feat for the eyes. As red-hot molten glass ingots are taken out of the furnace, blasterly bright in 900°C, an artisan deftly shapes the blob into a sphere by blowing air into it while turning it in a circle continuously. A little more pressure and the delicate globe will go bust and a bit less, the surface will turn out to be thicker than required. "The artisans have worked for generations and are experts at the craft. Vasim's husband's

Looking through the glass of ages

THE PROCEDURE



spreads evenly. Suddenly, the transparent globe becomes a reflective disc."

The brick-and-time furnace at Shishgar's unit is about two centuries old which is still operated with wood and coal. The operator, however, ensures that after every one and a half months, the furnace is shut for a month.

In their paper, Medieval glass mirrors in Southern Scandinavia and their technology, as still practiced in India, researchers Torben Sotho and Jan Kock write, "There seems to be only one place (Kapadwanj) in the world today where the technique of coating a glass mirror with lead in a manner similar to that apparently

employed in the making of medieval mirrors is practiced." The researchers add that the lead-tinted mirrors have been produced in India from the early 16th century.

According to a report by IIA Gujarat, Kapadwanj was the primary source of glass in the 18th century for the Bombay Presi-



Bashir Shishgar (left) with his son Vasim (right) in their workshop. Source: A. Kanungo

