

Article

When Narratives Belong to Others: Craft Evolution and the Question of Authorship

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Abstract

This paper examines how narrative authority shapes craft evolution by analyzing two Indian craft development initiatives: the Golden Eye exhibition (1985) and the Jawaja project (1970s–1990s). Drawing on narrative theory and design research, I argue that the capacity to author one’s own story from lived experience is fundamentally generative—creating conditions for autonomous evolution. While designers routinely claim narrative authority as a basis for innovation, craftspeople are positioned as subjects within frameworks others establish. Through an analysis of these cases and my embedded relationship to them, I propose five dimensions of narrative authority—source authority, generative capacity, framework control, ambiguity privilege, and validation—that reveal how structural positioning rather than capability determines whose stories count as legitimate bases for evolution. The paper demonstrates that even well-intentioned interventions cannot create genuine self-reliance without addressing the epistemic conditions that make craftspeople’s narratives recognizable as authoritative knowledge.

Keywords: craft development; narrative authority; design authorship; self-reliance; participatory design; knowledge production; lived experience

1. Introduction

Designers routinely draw upon their own experiences to give shape to that which does not yet exist. Ettore Sottsass sketched temples in Madurai, and those sketches became laminates [1,2]. Philippe Starck saw a squid-like lemon in a restaurant, and it became the Juicy Salif [3]. These narratives—rooted in lived experience—are not merely retrospective explanations but generative forces creating conditions for form to emerge. This raises fundamental questions: What happens when the maker of an object cannot claim the narrative of its creation? Can storytelling that is grounded in lived experience foster self-reliance for craft communities, as it does for designers?

This paper examines two significant cases: the Golden Eye exhibition (1985) and the Jawaja craft development project (1970s–1990s). Both represented sustained commitments by visionaries deeply concerned with Indian craft’s future. Rajeev Sethi conceived Golden Eye with genuine intent to provide work and business for craftspeople [4], while Ashoke Chatterjee led Jawaja over decades with explicit goals of building self-reliance [5]. Yet, both left crucial questions about narrative control unresolved. If such well-intentioned and sophisticated interventions could not shift who holds authorship over craft evolution, the issue may lie in the structural dynamics of how narratives are produced, circulated, and legitimized.



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This analysis focuses specifically on postcolonial craft development contexts in India, where design interventions operate within legacies of colonial knowledge hierarchies. I recognize that craft–design relations differ significantly across cultural contexts—Japanese Takumi traditions, Scandinavian craft movements, indigenous craft systems, and more operate under many different historical and institutional conditions. The patterns documented here reveal how particular institutional structures systematically distribute narrative authority.

2. Methodology and Positionality

This paper employs critical autoethnographic reflection as its primary methodology, situated within interpretive analysis of historical cases [6,7]. My direct involvement with both initiatives (I was proximate to Golden Eye through design education and peer relationships, and was a participant in NID fieldwork at Jawaja) provides an insider understanding while simultaneously implicating me in the systems I critique.

In 1984, I was selected to join Golden Eye and potentially work with Ettore Sottsass. I chose instead to study at Domus Academy in Milan, where Sottsass and Mario Bellini became my teachers. My classmate Chandravijay Singh worked on Golden Eye and stayed with me in Milan. Our conversations about translating design intent across cultures—how foam prototypes from Bellini’s studio would become stone objects in India—exposed how much creative work occurred in translation while remaining invisible in the exhibition’s final narrative.

My connection with Jawaja was more direct. As an NID student (1976–1982), I participated in 1979 fieldwork documenting potters and blacksmiths [8]. I documented that which NID required me to, but never asked artisans to narrate their own perspectives on practice evolution. This omission, which seemed natural within NID’s framework at the time, is precisely the pattern I now critique.

My closeness to these projects offers insider understanding, even as it situates me within the systems I analyze. My ability to author this analysis depends on the very forms of institutional validation that the craftspeople, in these cases, lacked. I cannot provide critique on epistemic hierarchies from outside them. This contradiction cannot be resolved within this paper, but acknowledging it is essential to the argument.

The analysis draws on the documented histories of both projects, my own memories and reflections, and narrative theory that provides conceptual frameworks for understanding how stories function as generative forces. The limitations of this exploration include retrospective interpretation, partial documentation (primarily from design and development professionals’ perspectives), and my single-analyst perspective. Collaborative research with craftspeople would yield different insights, though this would face its own methodological challenges regarding power and representation.

3. Narrative as Generative Force: Theoretical Framework

3.1. Prospective and Retrospective Functions

Narrative theory demonstrates that storytelling actively constructs reality rather than passively reflecting it [9,10]. Bruner’s work reveals that narrative structures fundamentally shape the way we understand causality, agency, and possibility [11,12]. In design contexts, the stories designers tell about their work create cognitive scaffolding for subsequent innovation. Sottsass’s India narrative did not just explain existing laminates—it opened conceptual space where cross-cultural synthesis became legitimate design strategy [2].

A crucial distinction concerns temporal direction. Narratives function both prospectively (opening space for future work) and retrospectively (explaining completed work). When Jasper Morrison describes encountering “super normal” objects, or when Issey Miyake reflects on embodiment, these narratives authorize future exploration [13,14].

When Starck describes being “bored” by a lemon squeezer, this functions both retrospectively (explaining the Juicy Salif) and prospectively (establishing subjective dissatisfaction as creative insight) [3,15].

The critical asymmetry is as follows: designers’ narratives are validated in both directions simultaneously. For craftspeople in development contexts, narratives typically function only retrospectively, explaining techniques, describing practices, and evidencing outcomes [16,17]. Their observations are treated as data within frameworks others establish, not as frameworks themselves. Genuine self-reliance requires prospective narrative authority—the capacity to say “this is what I observed, and where my practice might go” and have that be recognized as legitimate.

3.2. Ambiguity, Authority, and Distributed Agency

Design discourse validates personal experience as epistemically valuable [15]. This creates a generative circuit: observation becomes narrative, narrative becomes insight, insight authorizes experimentation, experimentation generates further narrative, reinforcing authority. Designers also possess what I term ambiguity privilege—their license to be uncertain. Design scholars document ambiguity’s role in creative process [18–20]. Schön’s “reflection-in-action” describes working through problems by engaging with them [20]. When Sottsass writes, “I didn’t manage to get it clear,” he maintains authority because design discourse recognizes ambiguity as legitimate practice [21]. For actors positioned as service providers, questions become evidence of insufficient capacity.

Following Actor–Network Theory [22,23], design involves distributed agency across networks—materials, tools, fabricators, and clients all shape outcomes. My argument is not that designers unilaterally determine outcomes, but that attribution systems disproportionately recognize designers as primary authors, even when agency is distributed. Golden Eye exemplifies this: craftspeople made crucial decisions—interpreting prototypes, solving problems, adapting to materials. In ANT terms, creative agency was distributed. Yet, the exhibition credits, media, and design history attributed authorship exclusively to the designers. The network produced collaboratively, and attribution operated hierarchically.

4. Five Dimensions of Narrative Authority

Through analyzing these cases, I identify five interrelated dimensions revealing the way in which structural positioning determines whose stories count as legitimate bases for evolution:

- **Source Authority:** Who is recognized as an authoritative narrator of their own work? In design, designers are assumed to be primary sources with special epistemic status [15]. For craftspeople, the question is whether they are similarly recognized or whether their experiences are mediated by development professionals, designers, or curators.
- **Generative Capacity:** Are narratives recognized as creating conditions for future evolution or only describing current practice? Designer narratives function generatively—Sottsass’s India travels opened new directions [2]. For craft narratives to function generatively, craftspeople’s observations about materials, markets, or aesthetics must be recognized as legitimate starting points for future evolution, not merely as cultural data.
- **Framework Control:** Who determines what problems matter, what evolution is desirable, what success looks like? Designers routinely control these frameworks within projects they lead [24]. Within market and material constraints, they exercise autonomy in defining parameters. The question is whether craftspeople define their own problems or primarily respond to those that development professionals, designers, or markets define.

- **Ambiguity Privilege:** Who can be uncertain while maintaining authority? Design practice validates working through ambiguity as legitimate behavior [18–20]. Designers can pursue directions before knowing where they lead without being accused of lacking clarity. If only those positioned as creative agents can inhabit ambiguity while others must demonstrate systematic progress, this creates structural barriers to new directions.
- **Validation and Recognition:** Whose accounts become codified as knowledge? Designer narratives appear in exhibitions, publications, conferences, and education [14,21,25–28]. This circulation establishes reputation, attracts opportunities, and shapes cultural understanding. For craftspeople’s narratives to function as bases for autonomous evolution, mechanisms must exist through which their accounts inform broader understandings of craft development and legitimate directions.

These five dimensions operate systemically. Recognition as authoritative source enables generative capacity; generative narratives support framework control; framework control renders ambiguity productive; validation ensures narratives influence subsequent practice. Together, they constitute structural conditions making designers’ narrative authority possible.

5. Case Studies

5.1. *Golden Eye: Spectacular Synthesis*

The Golden Eye exhibition (1985–1986) brought eleven internationally acclaimed designers—including Frei Otto, Mario Bellini, Bernard Rudofsky, Jack Lenor Larsen, and Ettore Sottsass—together with Indian craft workshops to create handcrafted objects [4]. Conceived as part of the Festival of India, it sought to demonstrate craft’s contemporary relevance while opening economic opportunities for artisans.

Sethi’s intentions were explicit: “If it doesn’t provide work and business for our craftsmen, then it’s hypocrisy on our part” [4]. Yet, he described his goal as positioning Indian craft as “a muscular vocabulary capable of supporting the most contemporary imagination” [4]. The metaphor is revealing: “vocabulary” suggests craft offers expressive resources others can use rather than existing as complete language with its own syntax. This framing positioned the designers as the authors of sentences and the craftspeople as the suppliers of words, exemplifying framework control.

Between celebrated European designers and Indian craftspeople stood young Indian designers who enabled the ideas to take form. Singh coordinated foam prototypes in Bellini’s Milan studio, then worked with stone carvers in India. Creative agency was genuinely distributed: Bellini’s vision, Singh’s translation, and craftspeople’s material knowledge, tools, materials. Each node contributed essential decisions. Yet, attribution systems recognized only one node. The exhibition credits named Bellini as the author. The media focused on his vision: distributed agency in practice; hierarchical recognition in discourse.

At Golden Eye’s entrance, stone and brass plaques announced the designers’ names. Throughout the galleries, cloth panels carried the craftspeople’s words. As Brown observes, “The European and American designers’ names were etched in stone; the craftspeople’s words and images printed on cloth” [4]. Stone signified permanence, source authority; cloth suggested temporality and context. The New York Times and design publications covered the exhibition, consistently centering the designers as the creative authors [25–28].

Bellini spoke admiringly: “I strongly intend to continue my work with them. . . They are skillful men, with their precious hands and their golden eye” [4]. The phrasing reveals positioning: my work with them rather than our work together; precious hands suggesting instruments rather than creative minds.

The collaboration produced striking prototypes. Yet, the project concluded with the exhibition. For craftspeople, the outcomes differed. They received compensation and recognition but not narrative authority. They could not claim authorship or articulate where their craft might evolve. Most significantly, they lacked generative capacity. The framework—enabling the designers to narrate from their experiences of India and to authorize future work—was not extended to the craftspeople.

5.2. Jawaja: Decades of Self-Reliance

Where Golden Eye dissolved after one year, Jawaja represented sustained engagement spanning four decades. Located in rural Rajasthan, the project began in the 1970s when NID identified a community with weaving and leatherworking skills but limited market access and deep economic dependency [5,29–31].

Chatterjee explained its orientation: “It was not a craft project; it was development defined as self-reliance for those who have been the most dependent in our society.” The goal was transformation of economic and social relations. The community existed within structures of dependency—moneylenders controlled access to raw materials and markets. Breaking these dependencies required creating products the local power structure knew nothing about: leather goods for external urban markets rather than traditional footwear under moneylender control.

This strategy was deliberately political, revealing framework and control operating with explicit awareness. Yet, even this sophisticated consciousness kept framework control with external actors. NID determined that leather goods for urban markets would create independence. These were strategic judgments made with genuine concern—but the craftspeople did not establish these frameworks themselves.

Chatterjee articulated “design ownership”: “Designs had to be what the weavers could understand, respond to, modify, and develop.” He resisted clear attribution: “It is not easy to say which designs are theirs and which are ours.” This strategic ambiguity differed from Golden Eye’s hierarchy, deliberately blurring boundaries. Yet, Chatterjee’s formulation reveals tension: designs had to be “what the weavers could understand.” Who determined what they could understand? These judgments positioned NID as an arbiter of appropriate complexity.

By the 1990s, twenty years in, the accomplishments of the project were substantial. Craftspeople traveled internationally, gaining “street smarts.” “In those days, they couldn’t enter the Taj Hotel in Bombay. . . . Now they are no longer thrown out.” OXFAM sold their products for fifteen years. They became trainers and formed institutions. Income increased, market access expanded, and caste barriers were disrupted. By conventional development metrics, Jawaja succeeded.

Yet, Chatterjee’s reflection reveals something unresolved: “There is never a point where everything is done for them. . . . They keep saying, Tell us what we should do.” After twenty years, they still asked: tell us what we should do.

Then comes Chatterjee’s remarkable admission: “What right did we have to expect this community to be totally self-reliant? . . . At NID we realize that after 20 years we are also not self-reliant. . . . We expect things to happen at the village and grassroots level that we never expect at our own level.” He acknowledges structural inequalities: companies have “advertising agencies, banks, and consultants. Artisans as a group have none of that infrastructure, and we expect them to be self-reliant when nobody else is!”

Most significantly: “What we have not researched is the psychological and social impact on two generations. . . . We don’t know what stories they are telling in their own community.” Twenty years, and “we don’t know what stories they are telling.”

This is structural consequence, not oversight. The project documented production volumes, income levels, market relationships, and skill acquisition—metrics which development frameworks recognize as relevant knowledge. The question of whether craftspeople developed evolving narratives about where their practice might go was not a category the project recognized as important. The framework did not position craftspeople’s evolving narratives as relevant knowledge. They were subjects whose capacities needed building, not sources whose observations might reshape the understanding of development itself.

6. Comparative Analysis

Table 1 maps evidence across both cases using the five-dimension framework.

Table 1. Narrative authority across Golden Eye and Jawaja.

Dimension	Golden Eye-1985	Jawaja 1970s–1990s
Source Authority	International designers positioned as primary sources in exhibition credits, media coverage, design publications. Craftspeople’s voices appeared on cloth panels as cultural context, not interpretive authority. Mediating Indian designers remained invisible.	NID and development professionals were primary sources in publications and scholarly work. Chatterjee’s reflections became authoritative accounts. Craftspeople’s voices appeared as evidence of outcomes but not as analysts of their own evolution. After 20 years, they stated “We don’t know what stories they are telling.”
Generative Capacity	Designers’ accounts generated new opportunities, publications, future projects. Craftspeople’s experiences did not circulate as narratives opening future directions—collaboration ended with exhibition.	Development narratives about capacity-building were generative—shaped subsequent projects and policy. Craftspeople’s observations from decades of work, international travel, and market negotiation were not documented as innovation sources. Their knowledge functioned retrospectively (evidencing success) not prospectively (authorizing evolution).
Framework Control	Designers defined problems, aesthetics, and production logic. Craftspeople contributed expertise within those parameters but could not redefine them. The festival framework positioned craft as “vocabulary” for design imagination. Success measured by design innovation and international acclaim.	Despite principles of “design ownership,” frameworks remained externally defined: what products to make, which markets to target, and what self-reliance means. Craftspeople could modify designs and manage production within these parameters but did not establish alternative frameworks.
Ambiguity Privilege	Designers could experiment, revise, and explore uncertainty through prototyping; Sottsass’s “I didn’t manage to get it clear” maintained authenticity. Craftspeople expected to execute with precision. Their uncertainties interpreted as technical challenges, not creative exploration.	The project expected craftspeople to demonstrate systematic progress. After 20 years, when they continued asking “tell us what we should do.” This was problematized as persistent dependency rather than being validated as legitimate uncertainty. Chatterjee questioned expectations, yet the framework continued reading questions as insufficiency.
Validation	Designers’ narratives canonized through exhibition, international publication, and design history. Stone and brass plaques monumentalized names. Craftspeople’s contributions documented photographically but outside interpretive authority—words on cloth, suggesting temporality not permanence.	The development literature validated NID’s narratives about methodology and meaning. Academic publications cited Chatterjee’s reflections as authoritative accounts. Craftspeople’s narratives were not recognized as knowledge development discourse which was important to document.

Structural Patterns

The cases differ substantially: Golden Eye was a spectacular one-year collaboration; Jawaja represented decades of sustained engagement. Golden Eye aimed to demonstrate craft's contemporary relevance; Jawaja explicitly pursued self-reliance. Sethi worked within Festival constraints; Chatterjee questioned the framework itself. This strategic ambiguity differs fundamentally from Golden Eye's clear hierarchy. Rather than monumentalizing designer authorship, Jawaja deliberately blurred boundaries. The goal was not celebrated collaboration between named creators but enabling craftspeople to work as designers themselves.

Yet, narrative authority remained unresolved in structurally similar ways across all five dimensions. This consistency—despite dramatic differences—suggests the asymmetry is structural rather than individual. Even Chatterjee, who explicitly articulated concerns about dependency and double standards, could not redistribute narrative authority while working within the development frameworks which positioned NID as the knowledge producer and craftspeople as the development subjects.

Both projects were led by deeply committed individuals who rejected crude romanticization and explicitly aimed to support craftspeople's agency. Yet, neither created conditions where craftspeople's narratives were circulated as authoritative knowledge; neither positioned craftspeople as primary sources for understanding their own evolution; neither validated craftspeople's uncertainty as productive creative exploration; neither enabled craftspeople to define frameworks for their own practice's future.

This demonstrates how institutional mechanisms, professional discourses, and market structures reproduce asymmetries even when individual actors question them. Redistribution of narrative authority requires systemic transformation, not better intentions within existing frameworks.

7. Discussion: Why Good Intentions Are Insufficient

Structural frameworks explain why well-intentioned projects reproduce inequalities. The problem is not sincerity but systems of value deciding whose knowledge, expertise, and creativity are recognized. These systems normalize dependency for some while pathologizing it for others and read uncertainty as creative depth versus inadequacy.

Consider Chatterjee's observation that NID is also "not self-reliant," noting corporations depend on "advertising agencies, banks and consultants" [5]. This dependency is accepted as legitimate specialization. Yet, when craftspeople say "tell us what to do," it signals a flaw. The asymmetry reveals who is permitted to depend without losing authority. Designers rely on fabricators, suppliers, and consultants without diminishing creative authorship. But craftspeople's dependency evidences their insufficient agency.

The same applies to ambiguity. The design literature documents productive ambiguity in creative processes [18–20]. When Sottsass writes about not achieving clarity, they highlight an authentic creative struggle [21]. But when Jawaja craftspeople expressed uncertainty after twenty years, this was problematized. The framework could not read their questions as legitimate exploration because it positioned them as development subjects, not creative agents.

Craft sits between romanticization and imposed evolution. Romanticization freezes craft as heritage [16]. When "authenticity" forbids change, young people see only poverty. Imposed evolution—whether Golden Eye's spectacular synthesis or Jawaja's capacity-building activity—operates within frameworks defined elsewhere. What remains unexplored is craft evolution authored by craftspeople themselves, emerging from observation, experiment, intuition, and uncertainty.

The gap is not the absence of craftspeople who can shape their own evolution. Craft continuously evolves. The gap is the absence of conditions which allow such authorship to be recognized, documented, validated, and treated as legitimate knowledge. These missing conditions are epistemic and social: Whose observations count as knowledge? Whose uncertainty is creativity? Whose narratives are sources of innovation?

Von Busch and Pazarbasi identify important dimensions: skills, knowledge, capacity to act, and enabling infrastructure [30]. But capabilities alone do not confer narrative authority. After twenty years of the project, the craftspeople's stories remained unknown [5]. The issue is not whether craftspeople can solve problems but whether they can define what counts as problems worth solving.

This requires new epistemic structures, recognizing craftspeople as knowledge producers, not study subjects [32,33]. As Tunstall argues, decolonizing design requires dismantling hierarchies that render makers as knowledge recipients rather than co-authors [34]. This reframes craft from developmental category to site of epistemic agency.

Several structural barriers prevent recognition: epistemic hierarchies distinguishing knowledge producers from subjects [32,34]; attribution systems recognizing individual designers while treating craft as collective tradition [35]; documentation practices that cannot capture the frameworks they do not recognize as meaningful knowledge [5]; professional discourse conventions about what counts as authoritative knowledge and who produces it. These barriers operate simultaneously and reinforce one another.

8. Implications for Practice: Context-Specific Conditions for Narrative Authority

The transformation called for here is not about making craftspeople into designers, but about creating institutional conditions in postcolonial craft development contexts where craftspeople's evolving understanding of their practice is recognized as authoritative knowledge, on par with how development professionals' analyses or designers' creative narratives are recognized. What this requires differs fundamentally across cultural and institutional contexts.

8.1. Comparative Institutional Contexts

In Japanese craft traditions, the Takumi system creates recognized pathways to mastery. After approximately 60,000 h of practice (roughly 30 years), craftspeople achieve formal recognition as master craftsmen with authoritative standing in their domain [36,37]. Companies like Toyota employ hundreds of Takumi whose expertise is institutionally validated—they train others, solve problems, and their judgment carries weight in design and production decisions [38]. The Hida no Takumi system, initiated through an eighth-century imperial directive, has historically positioned master craftsmen as essential contributors sent to build imperial structures, embedding craft authority within national cultural institutions [39]. The Living National Treasures (Ningen Kokuhō) system, established in 1955, provides government recognition of craft mastery as culturally significant knowledge, with designated individuals receiving annual support and formal acknowledgment of their expertise as "Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Properties" [40,41].

In Scandinavian contexts, institutional structures established in the mid-19th century position craft parallel to rather than subordinate to design. The Swedish Society of Crafts and Design (Svenska Slöjdföreningen), founded in 1845, was explicitly created to maintain craft standards during industrialization and represents one of the world's oldest design societies [42,43]. State funding through bodies like the Swedish Arts Council and dedicated design foundations supports craftspeople through institutional frameworks where peers allocate resources [44]. The "democratic design" movement positioned craft-based

production as serving broader social goals of accessibility, with craftspeople recognized as contributors to national cultural projects [45].

These contexts differ fundamentally from postcolonial Indian craft development, where colonial knowledge hierarchies have positioned indigenous crafts as “traditional” (meaning unchanging, pre-modern) and have positioned Western-educated professionals as agents of modernization and development. Golden Eye and Jawaja operated within the development and design frameworks inherited from these colonial epistemic structures, even as they sought to challenge their economic dependencies.

The issue in Golden Eye and Jawaja was not the absence of skill or capability, but the absence of institutional mechanisms recognizing craftspeople’s evolving understanding of their practice as authoritative knowledge that development professionals, designers, curators, and markets should document, learn from, and cite as legitimate sources. After twenty years at Jawaja, when craftspeople continued asking “tell us what we should do,” the development framework read this as persistent dependency rather than recognizing it as potentially legitimate questions about direction. When Chatterjee acknowledged “we don’t know what stories they are telling,” this revealed that craftspeople’s sense-making about their own evolution was not recognized as the knowledge which the project needed to document.

8.2. What Transformation Might Require

Familiar frameworks, participatory design, capacity building, and co-creation may not address narrative authorship because they typically leave framework control with external actors [46–48]. Participatory design invites craftspeople into processes within frameworks others establish [38]. Capacity building develops skills without transferring authority to define their deployment. Jawaja demonstrated this substantial capacity without a narrative authority shift [5]. Co-creation acknowledges multiple contributors but often maintains asymmetry, where designers are creative agents and craftspeople collaborate within designers’ visions. Golden Eye exemplified this [4].

I tentatively offer the following directions for discussion, rather than making prescriptive recommendations. My concern is that proposing “paths forward” risks repeating the external prescription this critique identifies. Instead, these directions explore the conditions that might need to exist in postcolonial craft development contexts specifically, recognizing the following points:

- (a) Craftspeople should determine whether these directions serve their needs and what alternative conditions they would prefer;
 - (b) These suggestions emerge from my analysis of structural barriers, but craftspeople’s analysis of what they actually need may differ significantly;
 - (c) The goal is not to replicate conditions in other cultural contexts (Japanese Takumi or Scandinavian institutions) but to dismantle the colonial epistemic hierarchies that are in operation in Indian craft development.
- Inverting source authority would mean development projects, exhibitions, and academic research beginning with craftspeople’s own accounts of their practice evolution as primary sources, comparable to how design research treats designers’ reflections as authoritative. Rather than mediating craftspeople’s voices through development professionals’ interpretations, this would involve creating publication venues, exhibition formats, and research methodologies that position craftspeople as first-person analysts of craft development outcomes.
 - Enabling generative narratives would require creating institutional platforms where craftspeople’s observations are recognized as legitimate bases for future experimentation—not just as cultural data or evidence of capacity. This might involve documentation practices

that capture craftspeople's evolving questions and puzzles as innovation sources, funding mechanisms that support craftspeople pursuing directions emerging from their own observations, and market systems that credit craftspeople as originators of new directions rather than as executors of the designs that others conceive.

- Negotiating framework control means external development actors and designers relinquishing unilateral authority to define the problems that matter, the evolution that is desirable, and what success looks like. This cannot mean simply asking craftspeople to define frameworks within development paradigms that already structure what counts as legitimate problems. It requires creating spaces where craftspeople can articulate alternative frameworks that development institutions may not initially recognize as relevant—and having those alternative frameworks shape development practice itself.
- Legitimizing ambiguity would involve recognizing “we don't know yet” or “tell us what we should do” as potentially legitimate exploration rather than automatically reading such statements as insufficient capacity. This requires development frameworks. Distinguishing between uncertainty that indicates the need for skills training versus uncertainty that accompanies genuine exploration of new directions. The creative process of designers is understood to involve productive ambiguity [18–20]; recognizing craftspeople's questions similarly would mean not pathologizing continued dependence on external input when similar dependencies (designers consulting fabricators, relying on suppliers) are accepted as normal specialization.
- Redistributing validation requires that academic frameworks recognize craftspeople as co-authors of development knowledge rather than as study subjects; the development literature should center craftspeople's narratives as primary analysis rather than as supporting evidence for professionals' conclusions; and market systems should credit craftspeople as creative authors, comparable to designers. This means changing who gets cited, whose accounts appear in academic journals, whose names appear on exhibition walls, and whose observations shape our understanding of craft development.

8.3. Institutional Transformation, Not Individual Solutions

These transformations cannot occur through individual projects while broader structures, development frameworks, design education, museums, publications, markets, and academia continue recognizing only certain actors as authoritative. Golden Eye and Jawaja demonstrate that even deeply committed individuals operating within development and design institutions cannot unilaterally redistribute narrative authority.

This points toward collective responsibility across institutions. Development practice might recognize craftspeople's evolving understanding of their own practice as knowledge which development needs to learn from, not just as outcomes which development needs to measure. Design education might position craftspeople as intellectual partners whose observations inform design theory, not just as skilled executors. Museums might credit craftspeople as creative authors on par with designers. Academic publishing might create review processes recognizing craftspeople's first-person accounts as legitimate scholarship. Markets might attribute innovation to craftspeople rather than only to designers who “work with” them.

No single actor can transform the system alone. Yet, within each institutional domain, choices exist about how to recognize, document, validate, and circulate craftspeople's knowledge. The question is whether institutions currently distributing narrative authority exclusively to designers, development professionals, and academics are willing to redistribute that authority—and what losing exclusive control over framework definition would mean for professionals whose expertise currently depends on maintaining it.

I write this with the knowledge that my ability to author this analysis depends on institutional validation which the craftspeople in these cases lacked. The fact that I can analyze these structural barriers while these craftspeople cannot as easily publish analyses of design discourse exposes the asymmetry documented here. Resolving this contradiction requires change—not in craft communities—but in institutions like academia that determine whose knowledge counts.

9. Conclusions

This analysis of Golden Eye and Jawaja demonstrates that storytelling from lived experience is fundamentally generative, creating conditions for autonomous evolution. In the specific contexts examined here, the Golden Eye exhibition brought internationally recognized designers together with Indian craftspeople, and the Jawaja craft development project spanned decades in rural Rajasthan. Designers and development professionals claimed narrative authority, with their narratives functioning both prospectively (opening future possibilities) and retrospectively (explaining completed work). The craftspeople in these postcolonial Indian craft development contexts lacked institutional conditions, making their narratives recognizable as authoritative knowledge across all five dimensions identified here.

It is essential to clarify what this analysis does and does not claim. The term “designer” encompasses widely varied situations. Industrial designers working within large corporations often have limited autonomy and receive minimal individual credit. Their situation shares structural features with those of the craftspeople described here. Independent visual communication designers working directly with clients frequently position themselves as facilitators, helping clients to articulate what they want, rather than as autonomous creative authorities. The patterns documented in this paper concern a specific configuration: celebrated designers (whether architects, product designers, or design consultants) working in development or exhibition contexts with craft communities in postcolonial settings, where colonial epistemic hierarchies continue shaping whose knowledge counts as authoritative. The analysis makes no claims about designer–craftsperson relations in other cultural contexts, nor about design practice more broadly.

The asymmetry documented here is structural, not individual. Both Sethi and Chatterjee demonstrated deep commitment and sophisticated understanding. That their projects left narrative authorship unresolved indicates that the problem lies in the frameworks themselves—epistemic hierarchies inherited from colonial knowledge systems, development paradigms positioning certain actors as knowledge producers and others as subjects, market structures crediting certain designers as creative authors, and professional discourses determining which observations count as legitimate innovation sources. The consistency across two very different projects suggests that good intentions and individual commitment, while necessary, are insufficient.

This paper’s analysis is specific to postcolonial Indian craft development contexts operating within legacies of colonial knowledge hierarchies. Different cultural contexts create different conditions for craft narrative authority. In Japanese craft traditions, institutional systems like Takumi recognition and Living National Treasures create formal pathways where craftspeople achieve recognized mastery and authoritative standing. In Scandinavian contexts, state support through dedicated craft institutions established in the 19th century positions craft as parallel to design rather than as subordinate to it. These institutional structures emerged from different historical conditions and create different forms of narrative authority.

The transformation needed in postcolonial craft development contexts is not about replicating Japanese or Scandinavian institutional models, but about dismantling colonial

epistemic hierarchies that position indigenous craft knowledge as “traditional” (unchanging, pre-modern) and Western-educated professionals as agents of modernization. This requires creating conditions where craftspeople’s evolving understanding of their practice is recognized as authoritative knowledge within development frameworks, design institutions, markets, and academia that currently position them as subjects rather than knowledge producers.

After twenty years at Jawaja, Chatterjee acknowledged, “we don’t know what stories they are telling” [5]—a structural consequence of development frameworks positioning certain actors as knowledge producers whose experiences warrant documentation, and others as subjects whose outcomes require measurement, but whose sense-making remains epistemically irrelevant. Perhaps Jawaja craftspeople developed evolving narratives about observations, puzzles, and possibilities emerging from decades of international travel, market negotiation, and material experimentation. Those stories, if they exist, remain unrecognized as authoritative sources because institutional conditions did not exist to make them recognizable as knowledge that matters.

What would craft look like if craftspeople in postcolonial development contexts possessed institutional conditions for narrative authority comparable to what certain celebrated designers take for granted in specific contexts, or what Japanese Takumi or Scandinavian craftspeople have achieved through different historical pathways? We do not know, because such conditions rarely existed. The work ahead is in creating those conditions in contexts where colonial knowledge hierarchies continue shaping whose observations count as legitimate bases for evolution. This requires transformation, not within craft communities, but within development institutions, design education, museums, markets, and academia: these are the frameworks which currently distribute narrative authority and determine whose knowledge counts. Then, we can learn what craftspeople have been trying to tell us all along.

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