

Revival of the Traditional Crafts: Diversification Towards Utilitarianism

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Abstract

Making handicrafts in India is a family heritage that has been handed down through the generations. In India, millions of people still rely on home grown industries and age-old methods of manufacturing and production. These are the handcrafted and tangible manifestations of a certain community or culture. But, as the globe becomes more interconnected, items are becoming increasingly commoditized, and artists throughout the world must compete with things made in factories. The constant need for new variations on a product's style, design, and color pose a serious danger to artisans and threaten to supplant their work with mass-produced, factory-made machine crafts. The fact that Indian markets do not appreciate the genuine worth of craft is the industry's greatest drawback. When this worth is acknowledged, and consumers are prepared to pay a premium price for craft based items, it should lead to greater incomes for weavers and craftsmen and provide a boost for millions of rural-based livelihood prospects related to this industry. As a result of diminishing demand, an aging workforce, and the challenge of reaching new customers, many artists have relocated to metropolitan areas in pursuit of low-skilled manufacturing jobs.

Keywords: traditional craft, handicraft, indigenous, handmade, craftsmanship, globalization, artisans, commoditized.

Introduction

“According to the United Nations, over the past 30 years, the number of Indian artisans has decreased by 30%, indicating the need to re-invest in artisans to safeguard history, culture and an important source of livelihood.” William Bissel, MD, Fabindia.

If the ability to make things with one's hands is a defining characteristic of humanity, then the fact that craft has all but vanished in the "overdeveloped" world and is on the decline in the developing world should make us stop and reflect on what we're losing. In today's society, handcrafted goods are seen as rare and unique, giving them a premium price tag to match their rarity. In our developing world, it is seen as menial labor or as a revived method for the impoverished to get much-needed foreign currency.

Although it's true that we would be losing some stunning museum pieces, what if the true worth of a craft is not the final product at all, but rather the method by which it was created? Reference: (KenBotnick, Ira Raja, 2011) Craft was never only about crafting a basic product, and it is this process that appears to be disappearing as generations of artists pass down their knowledge. Rather, it was a statement of the artisan's own style and a hope for a comeback, rooted in a long and storied

history that spans decades and countless generations, a terrible amount of work, and a sense of pride (Alexandra Soteriou,1998).

Crafts Post the British Era

Has Indian design, in last 50 years of country's independence, empowered crafts community to become "freshly involved and "seek solutions themselves" on how to resolve this problem of designing for new markets? Have designers asked the right questions of the crafts community to lead to such empowerment? Perhaps it is now time to do so. "With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of development programs" (Poonam Bir Kasturi,2005).

While design intervention in crafts is welcomed by some as a necessity and an opportunity for exploring new prospects and help in craft revival, it is often considered by others as a threat. It is however argued that a link between the apparently conflicting tenets of sustainability can be achieved through responsible and strategic design innovation which integrates the social, economic, ecological and cultural aspects. Collaborative innovation between the designer and the craftsman is a good means of expanding the Craft vocabulary and tapping contemporary markets.

Contemporary Crafts Industry in India

A craftsman is one who is skilled in a craft technique and though he may produce a number of similar objects, each one however expresses the maker's creativity. (Jasleen Dhamija-2003) It can also be defined as a personal journey of the craftsman where the main objective is self expression. The personalization, imperfections imparted because of hand work and use of indigenous tools and skills are the factors that differentiate "craft" from a commodity (Design Intervention and its execution in Crafts of India-Amita Panda).

India, is a very big country with more than 3000 castes, 432 tribal communities, believers of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikh, Jain, Buddhism and Zoroastrian have been living together since centuries. Over 1650 dialects are spoken by the people of India. The planners and policy makers of India have been addressing many problems and concerns of the craftsmen and their craftsmanship but probably the issue is so vast and complicated that the issue has not been touched in a complete form.

Situation of the Indian Artisans

An estimated 71% of artisans work as family units and 76% attribute their profession to the fact that they have learnt family skills." Incredible India Despite royal and aristocratic support before to Independence and a major part in Gandhi's freedom campaign, crafts have gradually lost importance since industrialization's rise to prominence. The industry is now perceived as superficial, irrelevant, and elite, and bears a reputation of inferiority and backwardness.

A lack of well-developed regulations and initiatives to safeguard and enhance the ecosystem for craftsmen is exacerbated by the government's view of crafts as a dying sector. Mass-produced consumer items, which are often cheaper owing to the scale savings associated with automation, have essentially pushed out traditional crafts. Because of the difficulties inherent in the handmade industry, it is difficult for craftsmen to compete with mass-produced goods. In order to appeal to the

masses, it is frequently necessary to sacrifice quality and/or craftsmanship, which may result in the gradual loss of abilities over the course of many generations.

Languishing Craft Traditions

Traditional village economies relied heavily on the work of artisans, who made practical goods for local use based on culturally significant themes and designs. The traditional link between artisans and their customers has mostly disintegrated with the introduction of industrialisation and the growing urbanization of craft markets. As a result, the centuries of expertise and training of these craftsmen have been for nothing, and their profession is no longer viable (William Bissel, Managing Director, Fabindia; "Crafting a Living"; "Creating sustainability for Indian Artisans").

Significant changes occurred everywhere as a result of globalization. The global market is defined by the rapidity with which consumer tastes may shift, providing both more possibilities and larger risks to manufacturers. Due to their volatility, marketplaces for handcrafted goods are open to strategic methods of reaching buyers throughout the world. But, a sluggish reaction might force these firmly established handcrafted items out of the market, making way for mass-produced machine-made alternatives.

Antecedents of Indian Craft Traditions

Mohenjo-Daro-Harappa excavations show that advanced architecture, town planning, and technology existed in various locations as early as 2500 BC. The traditional wisdom of India was very well-structured and defined. There were even very specific canons and systematic treatises in the arts. Indian culture has traditionally placed a strong emphasis on the arts and crafts. Moreover, they represent the very embodiment of national identity. Some artistic practices are one-of-a-kind and difficult to master. The artists' forebears have passed on their knowledge of the arts to them. From the dawn of ancient civilization, India's artistic traditions have been celebrated over the world. During the last several decades, craftsmen have unwittingly acquired fundamental commercial savvy, transforming all creative forms from sheer passion to a legitimate economic enterprise.

In today's business climate, design is seen as a multifaceted creative activity that may help make sense of complex societal problems and provide comprehensive answers that boost competitiveness. Its capacity to mold ideas and transform them into realistic and enticing solutions for users, all while increasing national performance, has made it a staple of corporate innovation.

Design Innovations for Sustenance

The latest trends in Indian clothing are the outcome of a combination of old and new design techniques. The first steps of every successful fashion design are study and observation. A designer's interpretation of design sources is what makes a product really unique. Every experience, whether visual, tactile, or even sensual, might spark an idea for a new design. There is a mutually beneficial interaction between India's craft and design industries.

The designer's connection to nature and human history are facilitated via the process of making. Classical artisan techniques are updated for a modern aesthetic (Sanjeev Kumar and Nandini Dutta-2011). Designers serve as a link between the marketplace and the craftsman, who is sometimes too far removed from the client's physical location for the artisan to fully appreciate the client's aesthetic and cultural preferences.

When it comes to the craftsman, the customer, and the worldwide market, designers are crucial in determining craft's value.

Design Intervention in Indian Crafts

Every stage of the making of the craft is profoundly impacted by design interventions. To include the interventions in the appropriate contexts, with effective anticipated results and rationale, they should center on the identity of the a craft, its social and cultural value to its location, and the processes and materials involved.

An example of a design intervention would be the creation of a brand-new product, or the modification of an existing product by altering its: (i) form, (ii) size, (iii) color, (iv) surface manipulation, (v) function, or utility; (vi) the investigation of untapped markets, (vii) the reinvigoration of dormant ones, (viii) the application of time-honored techniques to the solution of contemporary problems, (ix) the adoption of cutting-edge technology to solve age-old problems, and so on.

Therefore, it is a meeting point between the old and the new, where traditional manufacturing meets the requirements of contemporary life.

Several regional arts and crafts have been lost or never recorded because their practitioners moved elsewhere. Memory alone stores the history, techniques, and supplies used in traditional crafts.

Revival of Crafts

Designer and craftsperson collaboration may increase craft vocabulary and access modern markets. It is also believed that the social, economic, ecological, and cultural dimensions of sustainability may be brought together via responsible and purposeful design innovation.

The introduction of these innovations into markets will need additional essential interventions and hand-holding activities, since they will mostly take the shape of necessary changes to current items. An intervention from design may provide the necessary insight and perspective to link and integrate the many efforts towards a successful conclusion. In India, one may find incredible indigenous ideas that, with little work, can become successful commercial items. For a nation like India seeking to become an innovation-driven economy, these points of reference might be indispensable.

Despite its numerical strength and immense export potential, the handicrafts sector suffers from basic problems of being highly unorganized with additional constraints like lack of exposure among artisans to new technologies, illiteracy, limited capital, inadequate market linkages and market intelligence, and poor institutional framework (Dibyendu Bikash, et al. (2016).

These problems have been further aggravated by a lack of adequate legal protection and due concern for the welfare of the artisans/workers with poor implementation and enforcement.

The absence of a comprehensive social security mechanism is a key factor in down turning the conditions of these artisans/workers, the majority of whom are usually socioeconomically disadvantaged. It undermines the workers' ability to make meaningful contributions and boost output and productivity. Social security thus acts as a motivational mechanism for workers and inspires them to focus more on their production and services. Besides, it constitutes an important step towards the goal of a welfare state which aims to secure and advance the socioeconomic well-being of its

citizens by ensuring economic equality and equitable standards of living for all (Constitution. of India, Articles: 38, 41, 42, 43 and 47).

The term ‘handicrafts’ encompasses a wide range of artifacts and there is no single, widely-accepted definition of the term. However, the definition adopted at United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)/ International Trade Centre (ITC) Symposium is one of the best definitions of handicrafts, taking into account more intricate factors relating to the producer, product, and process. It states that:

“Artisanal products are those produced by artisans, either completely by hand, or with the help of hand tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisans remains the most substantial component of the finished product. The special nature of artisanal products derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant” (UNCTAD/WTO (ITC), 1997).

Handicraft is a significant and prolific cum dynamic sector. The attributes like high employment potential, low per capita investment, high-value addition, participation of women and members of underprivileged social groups, environmental friendliness, and the potential for developing artistic, innovative, and creative ability makes handicrafts one of the most favoured and preferred sectors in the process of economic growth and development (Waqar Ahmad, et al. (2013).

The handicrafts sector is economically viable and requires minimum expenditure and infrastructure to establish. The products are prepared manually either by hand or using simple tools. Due to minimal start-up capital, the initial cost is either negligible or low and people can start a small-scale handicraft business that can be run at home or even in small rented premises. Approximately 90% of the handicraft business is decentralized and cottage-based (UKEssay, 2017).

Challenges of the Handicrafts Sector

Despite being one of the significant productive sectors with rich socio-cultural and economic value, handicrafts is suffering from some basic problems. The following are some of the challenges relating to the growth of the handicraft sector:

- a) Unorganized Production: Handicrafts is the most decentralized sector of the Indian economy with no established enterprise and formally recognized producer bodies. The majority of crafts are produced in unorganized settings. It undermines the growth of the sector by preventing access to resources including capital, technology, large-scale raw material purchases, diverse markets, etc.

Over time, more players have entered in this sector, taking advantage of its unorganized nature. This has led to an increase in the number of intermediaries dominating the industry and further exclusion of smaller artisans from fair wages and profits, increasing their plight and exploitation. Because of this marginalization, artisans remain delinked from emerging market and design trends, information on buyers, marketplaces, and consumer preferences, and lack the power to negotiate for reasonable business terms (AIACA, 2017).

The sector's unorganized structure makes it even more challenging to implement comprehensive programs in an outcome-based manner to enhance artisan enterprises and institutions. The

artisans continue to work under highly exploitative working conditions with unduly low wages and insufficient social security coverage.

- b) **Financial Constraints:** Craft producers face significant challenges due to a lack of working capital and access to credit and loan facilities. Although there are numerous organizations and schemes that offer financing, but most rural artisans are ignorant of such schemes. Moreover, financial institutions generally require security to repay loans, which is a huge barrier for artisans as they hardly have any security to offer (Bilal, 2019). Lack of accessibility to raw materials, credit and financing, proper equipment, and technology, perpetuates an exploitative environment, reducing artisans to wage labourers in the sector.
- c) **Poor Access to Information:** Lack of technical knowledge on changing design and current market trends or inadequate information on new developments in the craft area is one of the main weaknesses of artisans particularly those in rural areas. The number of institutes to offer craft education in rural areas is very low and the majority of artisans are unable to enjoy the potential benefits either owing to a lack of knowledge or inadequate access. Another significant barrier to handing down cultural heritage knowledge to the next generation is the lack of traditional craft training and research at professional institutes (Bilal, 2019).
- d) **A Decline in Profits:** Due to declining profits, handicrafts run the risk of becoming a part-time activity. The artisans associated with this craft have no longer an inclination to the craft since they have been unable to make a living out of it.

This scenario has compelled artisan community members to migrate to various occupations to improve their living and socioeconomic conditions. The younger generations prefer to look for more profitable career options elsewhere and are unwilling to pursue and carry on these handicraft traditions (AIACA, 2017).

The unwillingness of younger generations to pursue this career has led to the extinction of certain craft traditions and many are battling for survival. This has impacted the export of handicrafts.

Promotion of the Handicrafts Sector

The growth and prosperity of the handicraft sector are dependent on the socio-economic well-being of artisans and workers who work tirelessly and dedicate their time and effort to creating sustainable handicraft items. Social security measures are the facilities and services that are offered to these workers to ensure that their standard of living and quality of life won't be compromised by social or economic eventualities. It guarantees protection from unemployment by maintaining and promoting the creation of jobs, provides benefits for the maintenance of any children or dependents, and ensures their access to health care and financial stability against the consequences of specified contingencies.

Since the artisans and workers associated with the handicrafts sector mostly come from socially and economically weaker sections of society, the lack of social protection puts them constantly at risk of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, creating a significant barrier to both economic and social development. A strong social security mechanism, therefore, constitutes an important investment in the well-being of these artisans/workers. A more capable and secure workforce could lead to higher growth, which in turn would boost aggregate demand in the economy through the higher purchasing

power of this large workforce (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, 2006).

Conclusion

Although there is a larger framework of government schemes and programs related to social protection, financial assistance, market linkage formation, skill, and design development, and so on, the last mile user is unaware of them. As a result, access to benefits is restricted, if not non-existent in some circumstances.

A significant number of artisans have not reaped the full benefits of their labour and quality of life. To ensure that this creative and cultural industry continues to remain buoyant and vibrant, there is an urgent need to increase the outlay in social security schemes and make a progressive extension of the scope and level of social security coverage by making a stronger case for the deeper penetration and targeting of artisan beneficiaries for social security entitlements.

Strategic collaborations between the government, civil society, and other key stakeholders can go a long way towards achieving this goal.

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