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Indian Handicraft and Handloom Workers

Life and Working Conditions in Villages —A Brief Survey

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Indian handicrafts, traditionally made by rural artisans, radiate a certain charm of their own that has been long admired the world over for the brilliant mix of colours and exquisite craftsmanship. Rural units, or cottage industries, account for 78.2 per cent of all handicrafts produced in the country. Embedded in India's traditions and social history, they are the artistic expression of the makers, both women and men. About 77 per cent of the artisans are self-employed and the rest 23 per cent are wage earners.

There has been some decline in the domestic demand for the products with the change in people's tastes caused by globalization, but exports have continued to grow and in 2010-2011, they are expected to touch the Rs.1000 crore mark. European countries were the major importers during 2009-10, buying up 40.33 per cent of India's total handicrafts exports. At present (2010-2011) the exports have been growing at 15.45 per cent in rupee terms, which comes to around 23 per cent in dollar terms.

Despite the decline in the domestic consumption, many village communities continue to use hand crafted utility items for daily use. Items like images of gods

and goddesses, specially made for ritualistic purposes during festivals, are in great demand both in villages and towns.

The high degree of skill and knowledge needed in handicraft and handloom production has been handed down from generation to generation. It remains a caste-based occupation in the sense that potters' children naturally get trained by their parents and the same goes for handloom weavers, though the skills can be acquired by any one through training. But usually persons belonging to say the potter caste stick to making clay pots rather than weave textiles. This system of caste specific crafts continues, though the old belief of each caste following an occupation 'ordained' for them is now fading.

Unfortunately, this traditional industry is today under threat of extinction or steep decline because of the competition from the cheaper machine made local substitutes and imports. These trends have impacted the lives of many skilled artisans who are switching professions for survival.

The demand in the market has also fallen, as hand made products are becoming costlier in comparison to machine or mill made products. Almost no attempts at innovations and technological advancement have been made in the handicrafts field, leading to stagnation and increase in manufacturing expenses. There are no testing labs with instruments for quality check that would guarantee an even quality of products and meet the buyer's specifications. Also, the artisans do not have access to quality raw materials, besides the fact that there is a world ban on the use of items like ivory and tortoiseshell. Quality wood, especially sandalwood, is also in short supply because of environmental restrictions.

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Considering that artisans numbering about a crore are involved in handicrafts production, every effort should be made at making these skill-based industries viable and lucrative. State governments must take steps to increase the wages and improve their working conditions. Handicrafts generally require small amounts of capital; their fabrication is low on energy use and the natural raw materials are easily available. And as for man power, the unemployed rural youth, after a short, simple training, can easily be absorbed into the sector.

Sadly, some of the traditional crafts are 'vanishing into the sunset', given the inevitable fact of life that lifestyles and fashions change with the times and this very natural desire for change is being satisfied by a plethora of new, machine made goods. Once gone, it would be quite impossible to revive these crafts and now is the time to make earnest attempts to preserve them. Since thousands of people are dependent on them for their livelihood, there is a need to revamp and modernise the entire sector, with emphasis being put on giving due reward to the

skilled worker through the payment of appropriate wages, which should not be below the minimum wages of the country.

The age-old reliance of the poor artisans on middlemen and money lenders for getting the raw materials and selling the finished products should be diminished, if not eliminated. These are all essential steps if one is to lift the craft workers from a state of chronic poverty.

These masters of the craft feel a deep sense of pride in their creations which gives them a sense of self esteem and a standing in society: given a modicum of economic well being, they would never think of deserting a livelihood that is in their blood. But as things stand today, many of them are being forced by poverty to become factory workers or farm hands—a disgruntled lot who have lost their identity. Some of them, out of sheer frustration, gang up with anti-social elements. For them to regain their pride is important and they need to be encouraged with proper support from the state, NGOs, cooperative societies or self-help groups. They could be taught to innovate and improvise, use better tools and better raw materials. Innovative techniques can be taught to the workers through government sponsored programmes and the world of cottage industry can expand into a profit making entity—creating rural employment and lead to revenue generation for the state.

Besides the large number of women working whole time in the weaving sector or farming, many spend their spare time in crafts like embroidery, making it a gender specific livelihood. This area of the handicrafts sector could become a thriving cottage industry if these women are given market-oriented training like teaching them accounting and giving them access to better raw materials and credit.

Last but not least, handicrafts are a part of our artistic heritage unique to the Indian subcontinent. Many of the items (considered exotic and prized in the West) are truly beautiful, vibrant and environment friendly, factors that give them high value. Merely expanding their exports would not automatically bring higher income to the handicraft and handloom workers. They have to be trained in the new ways of their craft so that a new thrust is given to their capability and potential.

The task ahead is not easy. The government, NGOs and civil society have to be involved in saving and nurturing many of the crafts that are on the decline or are on the verge of extinction.

The purpose of this paper is to look at the working conditions of the handicraft workers in some of the states and try to address the basic problems. The aim is not

to gather data, but to present a first hand overview of their problems. During the course of my extensive conversations and interviews with crafts people in many places, I found that many of the problems were common to all.

There is bound to be a resurgence in the demand for handcrafted goods as the world moves away more and more from machine made goods that are ecologically harmful and energy consuming. Even in high fashion, designers across India are shifting their focus to handcrafted zari and embroidered embellishments for their garments, but the benefits of this have not 'trickled down' to the workers.

The increase in demand for handcrafted products in the future may also come from the development of real estate and retail business, as discerning buyers are likely to go for genuine 'ethnic' products that evoke the unmistakable aura of 'Indianness'. The demand will also rise with the growth of domestic and international tourism. E-commerce and the internet could also be exploited to give a boost to sales. In fact, it is being used extensively in some parts of India.

During my tours around some villages in West Bengal, Orissa, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Kerala, and Meghalaya, I found that even the highly skilled artisans were earning less than the minimum wages. The reasons are not only the slack demand and the economic domination of the money lenders and middlemen but, more importantly, the artisans have no access to innovative ideas and techniques, capital, infrastructure, the latest market trends, styles and fashion.

The only ones doing well are those who are already better off and educated, as they have access to capital and markets and are internet savvy. They are able to face the competition from machine made goods and cheap imports from abroad. They have found a niche for themselves in the export market, where the clients are more environmentally aware and artistically inclined. Their income from the regular flow of work is big enough for them to invest it back into business. They participate in trade fairs across the country and occasionally travel abroad, absorbing new ideas and contacting new customers.

This sample survey is not a comprehensive one, but hopefully, it reveals some of the basic problems facing the ordinary artisans and handloom workers. I have tried to cover most of the handicrafts. They include terracotta, handloom, bell metal craft, embroidery and zari work, clay dolls, wood craft, shola pith carving and sandalwood sculpture, Shantiniketan stained leather, scroll painting, patchwork embroidery on textiles, silver filigree, blacksmithy, bamboo craft, block printed textiles, wood carving and box making, and paper crafts.

Most of those interviewed were ordinary, practicing artisans. Burdened with debt, illness in the family, without access to a good supply of raw material or the market, and not having even a small production base, they are somehow managing to eke out a living at a subsistence level. The government's assistance, for what it is worth, is never adequate or timely though some artisans and weavers have benefited from marketing facilities provided by the state by organizing 'melas' and 'haats'. Many artisans function individually and arrange their own means of transport for taking their products to distant markets.

Cooperatives have been effective in dealing with some of the problems in Phulia (Nadia district), but in some places they are not doing well (Amtola) and there are allegations of corruption, as also apathy towards the workers. Much more needs to be done to empower the workers, specially the women. One happy example was a village in Gujarat, where an NGO did an excellent job of raising the economic status of the women workers.

Described below are some of the villages visited during 2007-09 in West Bengal, Orissa, Meghalaya, Rajasthan, Kerala and Gujarat. Nearly all the villages had a worn out look and long power cuts were a daily affair. Credit was hard to come by, general sanitation was in a dismal state and as for primary education and health care, they might as well not have existed as they were minimal and rudimentary. Thus the focus of the study is on the living and working conditions of handicraft and handloom workers who are contributing a substantial amount of foreign exchange to the economy, but are themselves not able to get a fair deal. The production and marketing chain is flawed and needs improvement for the sheer survival of the workers.

I have tried to argue that those who are doing well in their handicraft and handloom business are enterprising and are moving with the times. Their example should be followed by others with the help of the state machinery, NGOs and cooperative societies.

The Zari workers of Panchla (Howrah)

Indian designers based in Kolkata patronize the zari workers in this small village, Panchla (Howrah), on the outskirts of the city. They find great value addition in the embellishments made by the zari workers in which intricate embroidery, zari, glass beads and semi precious stones are sown into the fabric. Unlike the western designers who use the cut of the dress or suit as their unique selling point, Indian designers are captivating the markets at home and abroad with the intricate and beautiful zari work in their garments, which they outsource from far off places like this village in West Bengal. The embellished costumes, saris, and

stoles sell for thousands of rupees and an intricately embroidered and zari work ensemble can cost Rs.1 lakh or more.

Unfortunately, those who actually toil hard and are being used to infuse beauty into these fabrics by their painstaking work are themselves living in terrible conditions, working in poor light at the cost of their eyesight. Their income is a pittance when contrasted to the lakhs the designers at home and abroad make because of the value addition to the outfits by the artisans. It is not just the women, but also young school dropouts who are doing the actual work. They live below the poverty line and get subsidized rice but there is no money to do anything about the stagnating, decrepit infrastructure of the village.

Panchla is just about 10 Km from Kolkata and close to the national highway, but when one enters it, it feels as if one has been transported to some dark century in the past. There is no drainage, proper toilet facilities or tap water.

The artisans were busy doing the eye straining job of embroidering the sequins on to the saris and dress materials in the dim natural light. As for tube lights, the tubes were there, but no light. With deft fingers, the girls and boys were working on intricate designs in the light that was coming from the slits in the bamboo roofs. They all sat around the material which was attached to a bamboo frame. Above the frame was a green plastic sheet to shield the expensive material from rain so that direct light only seeped through a few holes in the plastic. The beads and sequins were in little bowls on top of the material, glittering in the dark.

They were paid Rs. 5 an hour, which meant Rs. 40 a day—far less than the minimum wage. How is it that the zari workers of Kolkata, whose work is famous all over India and the clothes they create carry the labels of famous designers, were living in such misery?

The answer is not difficult to find—ignorant workers caught in the clutches of loan sharks and middlemen who supply them with raw materials and give them the designs. Being desperately poor, the workers accept any conditions the middlemen lay down.

Some villagers and zari workers of Panchla also make wigs used in theatres. Though the market prices of the wigs are high enough, what the villagers get is a meagre fraction of it; demand too is falling because fewer and fewer theatre people are using these types of wigs. The workers could easily be trained to make different kinds of fashionable hair pieces or toupees for a bigger market at home and abroad.



Three steps could transform the life of Panchla villagers: direct access to raw materials, direct dealing with designers and their own marketing facilities. They could first use the increased income to set their house in order, build well-lit work rooms to replace the dingy huts. Self-help groups could have played a very important role in many ways, but they have not yet managed to organize the zari and wig workers into such groups.

Conditions in a nearby village were much better because basic necessities of the women who made baskets—bamboo and small simple hand implements—were easily available. With a little training, they have started a lucrative side business through self-help groups. They have their own marketing outlet and an assured income from the paan leave growers nearby who use these baskets for exporting the leaves to different states. Selling 40 baskets means a profit of Rs.200.

The women were better clad, the village was cleaner and there was even a tube well. The panchayatis did work actively for the welfare of the villagers—their eyes fixed on the next poll. The villages surrounding Kolkata exemplified how the 'other India' or, more correctly, the 'real India' lives. It is a far cry from the posh hotels and shopping malls of cities and towns that have risen on the toil and misery of the villagers—men, women and children.

Both the villages are quite close to the national highway going to the Haldia port, so there should be no difficulty in improving connectivity by laying small feeder roads and through telecommunication network.

In the health and education field, special care should be taken of expectant mothers and new-born children. Each and every child in villages, must have schools to go to for at least primary studies.

There is need to form self help groups for negotiating credit facilities with banks. Already, there are one or two big banks on the national highway that are involved in the development of villages nearby, but more credit banks are needed to banish the plague of money lenders. Often, complicated paperwork deters the villagers from approaching the banks, especially for small loans.

An efficient supply chain could be built by setting up a design centre that takes into account the latest trends, along with a marketing channel that would take goods from the villages to towns, making raw materials easily available and guaranteeing fair wages. The proud tradition of zari work can survive and thrive only if its real creators, the artisans, are not hounded by poverty into becoming unskilled wage earners, farm labourers or petty, street-side vendors.

Zari workers in Ranihatati (Howrah)

Since the demand for zari work is growing rapidly, designers in Kolkata are also patronizing another village near by, Ranihatati, and it is again the women who are engaged in heavy zari work saris and veils, most of which are exported to the Middle East. The traditional craft of this village since the British times is zari work; it is the Muslims who are the masters of zari craftsmanship, and yet they are mostly daily wage workers.

Here, the scenario is no different from that of Panchla village—miserable working conditions in dim light and badly paid women working overtime. Child labour is welcome here because their tiny, slim fingers can weave the tiny seed like beads deftly into the embroidery. They are paid less than Rs.10 an hour and the adults around Rs.30 to 50 a day. Here too, the business part of the zari work—i.e., the supply of raw material, design and loans—is the domain of the ubiquitous middlemen. Rarely do the Kolkata designers to come over to see how things are or to give instructions.

Terracotta in Panchmura (Bankura)

Panchmura is a small village in Bankura district near the famous terracotta temples of Bishnupur. Since centuries the region has been well known for terracotta figurines, horses and other animals as well as pots and plates of daily use. The Bankura Horse is the proud brand icon of the All India Handicrafts Board. Intricately carved out of clay and slowly baked in furnaces, the creations are then coated with a red oxide as a finishing touch. Terracotta pieces in India are fired at low temperatures in contrast to the very high temperatures used abroad.

Today, Bankura is not a prosperous district. The old houses wear an abandoned look, the living standards have plummeted and many families have fallen below the poverty line. Most houses do not have electricity or brick structures. The firing and baking of clay is done in primitive furnaces/kilns fuelled by sticks and twigs, cow dung, rice husk, and other waste materials which create a cloud of smoke and pollutes the village.

The potters told us that terracotta work is labour intensive and time consuming. Since a whole day is sometimes spent in making one item, the cost is high. They use the traditional hand turned potters' wheel and not the semi mechanized ones now used all over the world.

Some of the inhabitants of the village are prize winning master craftsmen, and yet they do not get a decent space to exhibit their creations. A lackluster exhibition

centre is located in the village, but they need a bigger and better one where customers from Kolkata and other big cities could come and place their orders.

Though Panchmura is a village full of poor craftsmen, their designs and artistic renderings of horses and other objects are known widely in the country.

The potter families live and work in a cluster, but they neither have a weather proof store to shelter their goods from the monsoon rains, nor any proper working sheds. They have no dependable means of transport, nor the material to make damage proof packaging for their fragile wares: dried grass is all they have. To add to all this, the bumpy roads from the village to the highway can cause a lot of damage. All these problems just add to the costs the poor villagers are already incurring.

The high quality terracotta items would have been a very lucrative export commodity, but for the fact that, transport-wise, they are just too heavy. The artisans have not mastered the art of light weight terracotta in which their Italian counterparts excel.

Their clay horses were originally made for local rituals. The potters make other ritualistic objects, especially votive lamps for propitiating the local snake goddess Manasha. Their Manashachalli is a tree like object with a base made of a clay pot and is famous throughout West Bengal. These 'challis' depict, through figures embedded in the design, the legends surrounding the snake goddess with snakes crowning the outer rim of the object. Some of these are really museum pieces, especially the big ones.

However, Bankura terracotta is another traditional craft form that is facing extinction, all because no serious attempts have been made to innovate ways to lessen the weight as also the production cost of the items. The demand for the iconic horse has slowed down from a gallop to a trot, as it is now not only costlier than the competing products from other parts of India, but also because the other items are now available in fiberglass and other synthetic materials. A handful of artisans are branching out into making other types of figures and objects with other materials but the rest are sticking on to old designs, material and techniques.

Terracotta master craftsman near Baruipur: Sashan village (South 24 Parganas)

In sheer contrast to Panchmura, the 60 odd potter families in Sashan Village (South 24 Parganas) are in a far happier situation doing the same job. The master

craftsman has a pucca house, a work shed and a relatively modern furnace opposite his house. He is innovative in the terracotta medium and has even ventured into making terracotta furniture. There are a plethora of terracotta tables, chairs, book shelves and dressing tables on display in his house. His one big advantage is that he, unlike the rest, is educated. The local potters work for him. He also makes wall plaques and other artistic pieces which can be hung and displayed in modern interiors. The master craftsman has taken to making modern designs, carving them on clay with a chisel and a knife. He then fires these items in the furnace. He also uses moulds and finishes them by hand. When we met him, he had many projects in hand, though he complained that the capacity of his furnace was limited. He needed a better furnace to remain competitive.

Like all others, he too found it difficult to get hold of the raw material (sticky clay) as it was not locally available and had to be brought from afar. Besides traditional decorations he also moulds western figures like cherubs and fairies into clay, having picked them up from English design books. He has a big clientele spread over other states and also Bangladesh.

Wood carving in Natun Gram (Burdhaman)

Natun Gram, a small village near an old town, Bardhaman, specializes in making the wooden owl; traditionally considered auspicious for homes as it is the 'vahana' or escort of the goddess Lakshmi. There are around 82 households and 300 artisans working on these owls and panels. Around 1000 pieces are produced in a month. Using simple tools like hand saw, hammer, drill and chisel, the men cut and carve the wood and the women give it a fine finish and paint it. Each family member on an average earns Rs.1500 to Rs. 2000 a month.

There used to be a big demand for the owls in the 1960s and '70s; but now, with the shift from the ethnic to the modern in the taste for interior decoration, the demand has decreased considerably, though the trend may well be a temporary phenomena.

Even now, during the festive season the demand shoots up, only to come down and stay down for the rest of the year, leaving the village in a state of inactivity.

Getting the raw material, mango wood, is a troublesome task. The logs have to be sawed down from the nearby forest and brought to the village. There are only 2 saw mills that cut up the logs and they are around 5 km away from the village. The artisans have to wait for days before they can get the right piece of log to work on. A show room has been proposed for the products.

Improved and powered work tools are needed for speed, efficiency and to give a finer finish to the products. It could reduce the working time, increase production and enhance the marketability.

The whole village is strewn with wood shavings and owls of all sizes and shapes. Even the children do some simple carving and painting. Nowadays, other wooden objects like statuettes of Radha-Krishna and dolls are being made. But the owl, with its unique design and colours, is the brand product of the village. On the white background of the owl is painted a distinctive design of red, green yellow and black lines.

Originally, the colours were mixed by the artists themselves but now they are bought in the market. Earlier, even the top coat or varnish was made in the village. In fact, one can say that the entire production process was carried out by the villagers from scratch.

With the demand on the decline in the urban areas that now prefer foreign bric-a-brac for the interiors, the year's output is not fully sold out. Many of the workers are not fully employed and cannot afford to send their children to school, as there is none in the village. A nearby ashram run by a swamiji, (Kathiababa), functions as a school where he is the sole teacher. For medical treatment, they have to take the sick all the way to the town and any emergency could spell a crisis. Power and piped water is in short supply. The women, poor and uneducated, have little to do with the making of owls because business is slow.

Silk weaving in Bishnupur (Bankura)

Famed for its terracotta temples, this town is a tourist spot of West Bengal. The kings of Bishnupur got artisans from Panchmura to carve scenes from Mahabharata and Ramayana into terracotta plaques that were embedded on the temple walls. The beautiful terracotta figures are there for the tourists to see even today. Terracotta was chosen instead of the usual stone because the latter was not available in this deltaic region of mud and clay. But they have proved equal to stone in withstanding the erosion of weather and time.

Bishnupur is also famous for saris which also depict the epic legends of the temple walls, woven into the borders and 'pallus'. Called Baluchari saris, they originated near Murshidabad. Intricate designs taken from the temple carvings are woven meticulously in multi-coloured cotton and silk threads. Around two hundred workers are involved in the designing, weaving and sale of these saris. Especially skilled are the weavers, who sit the whole day in front of huge Jacquard looms making the saris. It takes a week to complete a sari and the workers are paid around Rs.200 to Rs.300 a day.

There are several cooperatives involved in the business. They procure the raw materials, have set up sales outlets in the village and also manage the task of selling in India and abroad.

The problem this business faces is the steep decline in sales all over the country. The growing trend in recent years has been that fewer women are wearing saris, because taking good care of them is expensive and difficult, besides the fact that they are not the easiest of clothes to wear for the mobile and active young women in today's crowded, jet-set world. These saris are marked up by a huge margin when sold outside Bishnupur. One that costs Rs. 1500 in this town sells for Rs.3000 in big cities and they are certainly not for daily wear. In any case, the demand for special occasion saris is on the decline all over India.

Some Bishnupur weavers are not able to find employment on a regular monthly basis and work part time as weavers and the rest of the time work as farm labour or vegetable vendors. The weavers fear that if the demand continues to stagnate many of these handloom units may have to be shut down.

The problem here seems to be a lack of imaginative thinking to come up with ideas and designs. The same, monotonous items may be putting off the buyers. If other products, such as scarves, tablemats and handbags with the same motifs were to be marketed, may be the sales and employment would increase. But this may turn out to be self defeating if given the wide variety of choices the consumer has today, he or she finds it pointless to buy products using the same Bishnupuri designs that are used on saris. One needs to carry out some market research to find out what new, useful items could be made by these artisans and weavers using their age-old skills.

Jamdani sari weaving in Muragacha (Nadia)

A small village in West Bengal, Muragacha specializes in weaving intricately embroidered fine, cotton Tangail saris with Jamdani designs (intricate woven patterns of the Dhaka weavers). The weavers, manly Muslims, have been doing this work for generations. The handloom sheds are owned by a few families living close to each other. The shed is congested with looms that have narrow seats on which the weavers sit. Many children between the ages of 8 and 14 can be seen sitting at the looms weaving with their small hands. They are all hired labour earning around Rs. 10 a day.

They are all school dropouts whose poor parents cannot afford to send them to school and badly need the little extra the children earn. So child labour flourishes unchecked and the bulk of the work is done by the young. The young girls



looking much older than they are can be seen busily working at the looms, guided by older weavers

The loom owners do not have a place to sell their products and middlemen are taking their cuts by buying cheap and selling at high prices in nearby towns. The owners pointed out that if they had a direct sales outlet in nearby towns, they would be free of the middlemen and earn much more. The state government, they said had not given them the permission to sell their goods at a place close to the bus stop on the main highway.

The women of the village make beautiful katha embroidery in their spare time for their own homes and for their daughter's dowry. Even if they wanted to, the shed owners will not stop the children from working as they are quick to pick up the skill.

Tangail sari weaving in Phulia (Nadia)

This small town is famous for extra fine Tangail saris and there are many outlets run by cooperative societies that sell the saris. The societies seemed to be running smoothly and are able to promote new designs and textures in cotton and silk. They have an impressive show room where foreign clientele come to see the different designs. The society we visited was doing good business with Japanese clients, who give the designs and other specifications and then import the product in bulk. There were distinctive and attractive scarves on display along with dress materials and fabrics for interior decoration. There were many newly designed saris as well.

The handloom cluster is dotted with huts of the handloom weavers who are given the design and the yarn by the cooperative. The looms are run both by men and women and they get paid separately for each piece they weave.

There seemed to be enough business to keep the village occupied throughout the year, but the weavers' continue to live in poorly built bamboo huts with a bare minimum of furnishings inside. This was because their fixed income was very poor compared to the profits of the cooperative.

Cotton sari weaving in Dhaniakhali (Hugli)

Dhaniakhali is another village which is famous for its handlooms and saris that have been popular in Bengal for hundreds of years. Cooperatives supply the yarn and designs to the weavers, who are also part-time farmers. The sale of saris is good because of the well known traditional design, especially during the Bengali

New Year and the Durga Puja, when Bengali families go on a shopping spree for saris, among other domestic items. The saris are particularly liked for their slightly thicker weave and colourful borders which housewives find very comfortable to wear while doing domestic chores.

Yet, the weavers are facing the usual problems of low output, technological stagnation and subsistence level income.

Tangail sari weaving in Amtola

The weavers of this village on the outskirts of Kolkata work under the Amtola Cooperative but it has not helped them to earn a decent livelihood. They are very poor and are paid piece rates. They said the 'corrupt' cooperative members had refused to let them use the equipment (for modernizing the work process) given by the state government and had kept it in their possession. Amtola is full of Bangladesh migrants who had fled during the 1971 war.

Despite the popularity of their product, the villagers are beset with problems like low output and uneven quality of the saris, etc. Open, clogged drains and the sparsely furnished huts painted a picture of a village languishing in poverty.

Bell metal and Dhokra sculptures in Gushkara-Daryapur (Burdhaman)

This is one of the poorest villages in the region. Located near the relatively big town of Burdhaman, the village is inhabited by a tribe called Kamars who are considered low caste and are engaged in metal craft. These tribal people are spread across Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Chattisgarh, practicing the same craft. They do not speak Bengali and live in a cluster of households.

The village presents a stark picture of squalor and penury—bare houses peopled by poorly dressed inhabitants. After lunch, men drink home brewed liquor and do no work. They just did not have any energy, they told us, because the lunch was more a starvation diet and the liquor was a substitute for food. The women were busy lighting fires to bake the clay figures and the whole village was enveloped in choking smoke.

They do not possess any machines to help them make simple accessories to adorn their metal figurines. Just a few simple pressing and cutting machines would have been of great help, but even these were not available. Only one machine that was there was used by all the craftsmen of about 30 to 40 households making bell metal goods. The entire community lived on the meager income from bell metal handicrafts. It is tough, hard work and the costs are on the rise; marketing the

goods is a herculean task. There is a scarcity of metal scraps that the villagers buy from nearby factories to sculpt statuettes. First they make a wax mould of the statuette (or toy) and then coat it with clay. Then the mould is heated and the wax melts, leaving a clay mould into which molten metal is poured and then baked. After cooling, the clay cover is chipped or broken off and the metal figurines are ready for final touches given by hand.

It is a long, labour intensive process which, therefore, is a costly one. The bigger items, undoubtedly beautiful, can cost thousands of rupees. The artisans do not make too many big items as the demand is stagnant and the small pieces fetch them a pittance. The bulk of the money goes to the middlemen and the scrap metal factories. Both scrap metal and wax are now more difficult to get and more expensive.

Most households fall below the poverty line. There are no schools or hospitals nearby and the children are blighted with malnutrition as well as diseases concomitant to smoke pollution.

Clay doll making in Ghurni, Krishnanagar (Nadia)

The village Ghurni near Krishnanagar town is famous for its clay figurines since the 19th Century. Potters making clay statuettes of gods, goddesses and folk figures clad in traditional garb were famous even during British raj. Their work was displayed in the Great Exhibition of London in 1856. Their raw material is the deltaic mud from a river nearby.

A master craftsman and his sons have now gone into fiberglass work and have given up terracotta that originally made them famous. Other artisans some how eke out a living making plaster of Paris casts of famous Bengali personages like Swami Vivekananda and Ramakrishna Paramhansa.

The potters said they were losing business to the Chinese who had taken over the industry and were exporting the idols of the gods and goddesses of India. The potters now have small shops selling Chinese figurines and only a few of their own creations are displayed in the show cases. The demand is there for indigenous items but, as is their wont, the Chinese have inundated the local market with cheaper and glossier versions, catering to the modern taste for bric-a-brac.

Some of the households are still making the traditional Krishnanagar dolls. First, the artisan makes the clay body of an artisan, then paints and dresses him in cotton clothes. Once done, he is made to sit on a wooden platform, displaying his

ware. These exquisitely rendered figurines of cobblers, potters and ironsmiths are even now much sought after as collector's item. In a potter's household, we found both the husband and the wife engaged in making these figures for the market in Kolkata. They earn around Rs. 1,500 a month catering to a competitive, shrinking market. Their art is slowly dying.

Only the fiberglass craftsman, his son and another artist making flat, decorative terracotta plaques are doing well. He has cleverly integrated the sculptural elements of doll making into fibre glass figures for interior and outdoor spaces. He is doing good business as his products are not fragile like the clay dolls. Of course, the terracotta work is far more exquisite with a lot of delicate details, but it is so breakable that transporting the items even to nearby Kolkata is difficult. The terracotta plaque maker, on the other hand, had the business sense to cater to the growing demand for such decoration objects rather than stagnate in helplessness.

The village, as we have now come to expect, has the same decrepit, forlorn look as the ones mentioned above. The demand for their work has shrunk to such an extent that one can spot their items only in curio shops. The reasons for their plight are also no different. They have been drowned in the competition from other more decorative new-fangled products because, professional traditionalists that they are, they could not come up with any new ideas for making new saleable products at affordable costs; only the master craftsman and the plaque maker managed to innovate and do well. What adds poignancy to their sad tale is that their dying craft of creating miniature human figures 'from the earth itself' is next to none and combines the arts of sculpture, painting and dress making. And still it is dying.

Silk Spinning and Weaving in Bahrapur-Murshidabad

Famous for wild silk or Endy and Moonga silk, Behrapur has a khadi silk manufacturing unit which specializes in spinning raw silk from cocoons. There are several separate sheds in the rather disorganized factory. Women work in the spinning section and men in the cocoon boiling section. Men attend to the hot vats in which silk cocoons are immersed and boiled. Working conditions, especially ventilation and heat control are very poor and the boiling section is hot and stuffy with a lot of smoke and very little air. In the spinning section the women tend to spindles on spinning wheels and on carding machines. Here too, the rooms are dark and stuffy. The wages are low and the working hours long. The silk yarn is woven into fabric in another unit.

There is a good demand for wild silk hand woven fabrics in India and abroad. It is less expensive than silk products from the South and, during festival seasons,



moonga silk saris are very much in demand. Cloth by the yard is also sold in various outlets in Bahrapur. This industry may survive because of the robust demand and low costs. There is no competition from synthetics in this area because the product is unique. They have a good cooperative society which markets the products. The silk weavers are well paid but the working conditions of the spinners and processors is appallingly unhealthy and dingy.

Shola pith carving (Murshidabad)

Murshidabad was famous for ivory carving in the past. Exquisitely crafted ivory furniture can be seen in the nawab's palaces. But the skill is being lost to the times and the craftsmen are now working on another marble-like material, 'Shola pith', with equal finesse and precision. It is a white natural material obtained from reeds and can be made into fine looking objects. Furniture is no longer made of ivory and shola is too fragile for the purpose.

Shola is the inside layer of a bamboo like reed that grows in water and is harvested from the river and dried. Then the reed is split open yielding the raw material—shola—which is very light, fragile and suited to intricate carving. Indeed, delicate lace like work can be done on this material which ends up looking very much like an ivory piece.

There is demand for shola pith items during festivals and weddings. The carvers are now making interesting decorative shola items for houses and they are in demand. This too, however, is a declining craft because carving of shola pith is time consuming and labourious and yields low returns. It also faces competition from similar and cheaper synthetic materials. Plastic decorations seem to be the order of the day for wedding and puja pandals.

Sandalwood carvers (Murshidabad)

Bahrapur also has a number of sandalwood carvers, who are turning out intricately carved clock frames and other objects like candle stands and statuettes of gods and goddesses. Originally, they were famous for their ivory carvings but since the ban on ivory, have turned to sandalwood. Carving, per se, has been the craft for centuries for this small group called Bhaskars. Many are master craftsmen and carve fine pieces on special order.

The few master craftsmen who live in the town are doing well and have a clientele of their own. It is not a craft which is expanding because there are no new recruits to the profession. It is likely that the Bhaskars will survive for a generation or two and then fade away, because turning out hand made sandalwood items is not cost

effective, given that the price of the sandalwood is rising every year and its availability falling. The pieces on show in the houses of the craftsmen were exquisite. They are now collectors' items, gifted by the Government of India to visiting foreign dignitaries. Some collectors are still placing orders for expensive statues and clocks. But one felt that it was a declining craft, despite the available talent because the craftsmen are unable to find young people willing to learn the craft and keep the profession alive. It is not a mass produced handicraft and thus is reserved only for the few who have been practicing this craft for generations.

Kantha embroidery in Shantiniketan (Birbhum)

A group of women in Shantiniketan pioneered the revival of Kantha embroidery work in the 1950s. They were inspired by a very individualistic past time of women in rural Bengal who, instead of throwing away old saris and dhotis, layered and sewed them into colourful coverlets for personal use. It has become a popular embroidery form and has now been adapted for decorating and embellishing textiles, saris and household items. The centre for making these hand crafted products is Amar Kutir, situated on the Bolpur-Suri State Highway, about 7 kilometres from Bolpur railway station and 4 km from Shantiniketan. It is an NGO working for rural artisans engaged in leather goods and batik painting, as also kantha embroidery. They numbered about 60 people—mostly women.

Kantha saris are embroidered under the guidance of instructors in Amar Kutir. The women who used to embroider wrappers or shawls and bed coverlets for household use have been trained to embroider the saris with intricate designs on the borders and pallus. The raw materials and the designs are provided by the Amar Kutir staff engaged in rural development. It gives rural women a source of income and livelihood. The work is supervised for evenness in style, checked for defects and is sold in the Amar Kutir show room.

Shantiniketan leather goods

It was Rabindranath Tagore who launched the Shantiniketan Leather Products project under his rural development programme. Apart from Amar Kutir, there is a cluster of 25 small scale units and 35 unregistered cottage industries engaged in manufacturing these colourful artistic leather items like shopping bags, ladies purses, hair clips, and jewellery boxes. They produce around 20,000 pieces a month. The cluster has been undertaken by SISI Kolkata, under the MSME cluster development programme.

The designs are first embossed on the thin vegetable tanned leather with sharp hand tools or an embossing machine. Local women then do the job of staining

and painting on the designs. The painted leather is then made into the final product in another department. There is big demand for them in the country and abroad. The high quality export items, such as painted and embossed dog leashes and collars—made mainly by young boys—are a sellout in the West.

All these enterprises are labour intensive and very little money is needed for the machinery used. The dyes used, however are not all 'vegetable dyes', though efforts are being made to introduce more vegetable dyes because chemical dyes cause skin problems for the leather workers. Since vegetable dyes are expensive, their excessive use would reduce the cost competitiveness of the products. In both the industries there is scope for expansion, but they are facing intense competition especially from China. The women don't even use brushes to apply colours. They just use their fingers or rags dipped in paint, which are health hazards.

There is also the problem of supply because the units in the cluster and in Amar Kutir cannot undertake large, bulk production given the limited availability of both raw materials and skilled workers. Training rural women has been a major achievement of the cooperative society, but it is equally necessary to empower them with marketable skills. Thus, the NGO has its own production base which provides employment to women and is also marketing products made through 62 Self-help Groups covering around 800 artisans.

Shantiniketan kantha embroidery and leather goods do have a good market, but it cannot beat the competition and expand unless new, innovative techniques, designs and products are introduced.

Chikankari Embroidery in Babnan (Hoogly)

The chikan embroidery in Babnan village is very different from the famous Lucknow variety, in which 'shadow work' is embroidered on transparent muslin. Babnan's artisans run satin stitch patterns on white or pale mill cloth with cottan thread. The entire village is engaged in this intricate 'cut and embroider' work. Women sit on the ground and work the whole day, embroidering tablecloths, bedsheets, bedspreads and the like for a wage as low as Rs.30 a day.

There is a niche market for these items all over India, run by a network of agents who place orders with the owners of the chikan units. Here too, keen competition from machine made products is killing the cottage industry and again the need is a change of design and the look of the finished product. But the traditional embroiders are a contented lot, quite happy doing what they have

done for years. They said they did not want to aim too high or go to far out places to sell their products.

The work place for women—for a change—was clean and airy and they had toilet facilities nearby. They seemed to be quite happy working together in the room, despite the long hours and meagre pay.

Meghalaya

Blacksmithy Artisans cluster in Myllieu, Shillong

A cluster of 96 farm implement units manned by 500 to 600 blacksmiths can be found along the main road near Myllieu, Shillong. They manufacture spades, axes, knives, cutters, smoking pipes and other related articles. The supply is restricted to the locals and the raw materials come from scraps of steel from old/discarded axels of trucks, costing around Rs.35,500 per ton. They are thus recycling waste and cast away metal parts into useful implements for farmers. Each unit is in a position to manufacture around 20 to 25 pieces of spades or other similar products in a day. Each piece sells for Rs.160 to 250 and the artisans involved are being paid at the rate of Rs.100 to Rs.150 per day, depending on their skills. The artisans prefer beating red hot iron with muscle power rather than use a mechanical hammer for getting the right thickness.

The usual problems of credit availability, marketing and technology upgradation tend to reduce the smithy's output and discourage increase in production. But the units we saw restricted themselves to catering only to local demand. The owners did not show much interest in diversifying production nor were they interested in exporting.

Cluster of Bamboo Bows and Arrows in Nongkynrih village, Shillong

Bows and arrows are used for ceremonial purposes in Meghalaya. There are around 25 to 30 artisan families in this village who are engaged in the rather primitive craft of making bows and arrows and fishing rods. A few artisans in the cluster also manufacture pen knives. Each day the artisans manufacture 4 to 6 bows and quivers of arrows, the cost varying from Rs.25 to Rs.100 per piece, depending on the size of the product.

The main raw material required is the local bamboo and feathers, all easily available. There is sufficient local demand to keep the artisans busy and they are able to earn Rs.300 to Rs.400 per family per week.

These artisans are practicing a primitive, tribal craft that has been theirs for as long as the tribes have existed. They see no reason to 'change with the times' because the demand is entirely local. But their living conditions are poor and they need to earn more, which is possible only if they think of—or are guided to—using the same skills to make something more lucrative and for a bigger market.

Wooden kitchen implements cluster in Mawblang village, Shillong

Around 20 to 25 families who dwell on the hillside of this remote village make their living by carving out spoons, forks, ladles and spatulas from wood, which is in plentiful supply in the forests around them. As they sit and carve in their small huts, they are soon surrounded by huge piles of wood shavings. They admit that a lot of wood is being wasted and they need simple wood cutting machines.

The craftsmen take these items to the local market where there is sufficient demand and the average price realization is around Rs.10 per item. Each family is able to earn Rs.1500 to Rs. 2000 per month.

The village is poor and there are no schools or hospitals nearby. What they need is some agency which could guide them in better designing and marketing of these eco-friendly products that are gaining popularity abroad. With a little training and a few cutting machines, they could produce items with quality finish that would fetch them double the present income.

Orissa

Pipli Patchworks

Pipli is a small town in Orissa entirely devoted to patchwork stitching and embroidery. It is doing brisk business. Almost all the workers are from the Muslim community and the entrepreneurs supply them with cloth, designs and threads. Workers are busy making giant sun umbrellas, bedcovers, and roof canopies bright with colours, which has made Pipli products synonymous with patchwork and embroidery. Innovative ideas have caught on and now they are making hanging lampshades, boxes and floor coverings. There are many showrooms selling the products inside the town of Pipli alongside a state highway, but most of the workshop/factory owners supply directly to customers on order all over India. The big umbrellas are particularly impressive and are much in demand in India and abroad. The colorful patch work comprising elephants, horses, lotuses and other fauna and flora are cast into geometrical designs and are embellished with mirrors and embroidery. There has not been much change in the designs of Pipli in recent times, but the demand is good and business is flourishing.

The factory trains new recruits and the local artists do the designing. There is a good amount of professionalism in the enterprise, but the workers are poorly paid. It appears that only the entrepreneurs are prospering, all because they provide the infrastructure, space, sewing machines etc. Other patch work items can be produced and, through advertisements, more markets can be reached. But the owners seemed to be satisfied with the present state of their business and were not too keen on expansion. They said that they would have to deal with the problems of credit and training of workers and that, currently, they did not have the capacity to deal with huge overseas orders.

Scroll painting in Raghurajpur

This unique village is like an artists' colony. All the residents are patua artists who have been painting wooden idols of Jagannath for centuries. They also paint scrolls for ritualistic and decorative purposes. Now, they are also working on bamboo slats. First, the designs are etched/carved in the slats with sharp instruments and then the figures that have emerged are stained with ink.

The entire family—men, women, girls and boys—paint in their spare time. The master craftsman, usually the head of the family, does the main task of design carving and also gives the items the finish. Their is an occupation inherited from generation to generation. The families also make their own version of canvas (for painting) expertly layering old dhotis with glue. Fine paint brushes as also vegetable dyes are also made at home. It is a poor village nevertheless, because the demand for icons, painted scrolls and bamboo slat wall hangings is not sufficient to sustain the growing population of this village. Many of the younger generation, especially the boys, are leaving for work in towns.

The draughtsmanship is intricate but the figures, motifs, the tales that are depicted are all too monotonously the same. It could be one of the reasons why Raghurajpur, instead of flourishing, is languishing on the verge of poverty.

The detail and care that goes into the work mean hours of sustained work. Naturally, therefore, the prices are higher than those of other handicraft items for home decoration. Also, as is the bane of all households bogged down in tradition, no one has thought of diversifying into other domestically useful products like boxes, cabinets, headboards for beds etc. Is this craft, so rich in talent inherited through generations, also lying on the death bed of stagnancy?

A unit making coconut fibre toys near Bhubaneshwar

Near Pipli, there is a small unit run entirely by women, making coconut fibre toys and it is doing extremely well. First, the fibre is wrought by hand into animal

figures and then it is covered with threads stiffened with Flavicol glue, giving the hanging toys a unique look of its own.

The demand is high as they cater to the designs given by foreign clients, particularly to adorn the Christmas trees. The raw material comes from waste outer fibres of a coconut and is easily available. The girls are trained by a cooperative to cover the different vegetable, flower or animal shapes tightly with thread. Eco friendly and artistic, these products tell the success story of a women's cooperative venture. Living at a walking distance from the work place, the women manage to balance their part time jobs with household work. They got their break from foreign buyers who supply the designs and help in the marketing of the product.

Textile unit making Ikat saris near Bhubaneshwar

There are several cooperatives units making ikat weave saris (mostly silk) near Bhubaneshwar, operating within the local weavers' community. Women also work at the looms, weaving traditional saris, though some new designs have been introduced. The workers are paid Rs.1000 or so a month and a family can earn upto Rs.3000 a month. The raw materials and looms are provided by the cooperative. The showrooms, though small and cramped, are in the village and one can buy directly from them.

They have not ventured into other textile products nor have they diversified into newer markets. The cooperatives are satisfied with the profit from local sales. The future looks good, as long as the demand for these saris is sustained.

Silver Filigree work in Cuttack

This famed and ancient silver wire work from Cuttack is still flourishing, though the demand for jewellery, ritual vessels and other decorative items is not expanding much. For making them, a length of silver ingot is first drawn through smaller and smaller holes to make them into thin, malleable wire, which is then twisted and turned into various beautiful shapes and objects. They are then soldered together to give them strength and durability. With the rise in the price of silver the demand for filigree objects has also gone down. Young boys sweat it out in the workshop in the sweltering heat of constant soldering.

The three dimensional nature of filigree work requires skills of sculpting and precision. The milky white silver objects and jewellery are displayed in the show rooms nearby in the town itself. The jewellery is lace like and intricate. The craft needs fresh ideas for design and utility as there is a decline in demand for traditional items.

The main threat to this craft comes from tastes shaped by globalization and a decline in clientele for traditional vessels and jewels.

Gujarat

Cotton sari weaving in Sinhol, Khera District

Showing admirable enterprise, the rural women of this village have been empowered by organizing themselves into working groups. They now possess the confidence of togetherness and have shed, to a great extent, their sense of isolation and helplessness. The task of organizing rural women is a difficult one and is being undertaken by a group of educated women who have also designed programmes for their training and employment, besides advising and helping them to improve their conditions of work and incomes.

We saw women being trained to weave cotton textiles by a well known NGO, SEWA (Self Employed Workers' Association), in Sinhol village. They were making coarse saris in their homes meant mainly for the local market. The designs, simple but modern, were supplied by SEWA. The saris and bedcovers were being sold for Rs.250 a piece.

After the training, women are given looms to work at home. SEWA also purchases the yarn for the group of women who have joined the NGO. It takes care of the marketing and the workers get around Rs.1000 per month.

The women complained that the village infrastructure was poor, that they did not have power in the common work place and that the large looms took up a lot of space at home. There was constant breakage of yarn, slowing down the work. The looms which had to be fitted into their houses, were too narrow for making double bed sheets that were more in demand.

Though there is power in the village, there was little sanitation and the sewage was uncovered. Water came in fits and starts in the few dwellings that had water connections. Those less fortunate drank water from tube wells. Despite the difficulties, the women appeared contented and were optimistic about solving their problems. They admitted that their negotiation skills had improved and they had become more vocal about their problems after working with SEWA. They had also become more conscious of their rights, though many had only a few years of schooling.

Adult literacy classes have been started. Most women want to learn to read and write and are keen to know what is happening around them. Most of them had

been withdrawn from school on attaining puberty and had been married off early. They now wanted to be able to read road signs and bus numbers and travel to town to sell home-made food stuff.

Working mothers keep their small children in a crèche, but they complained the school was far away and the girls had to be withdrawn from it because of the distance. They said they did not discriminate between boys and girls.

Women, being organized, have contributed significantly to the development of the village. But, being semi literate, they find it difficult to deal with the paperwork involved in getting credit from the banks. Micro credit through SEWA banks has helped them, but they need loans for other purposes, like medical, schooling of children and for buying equipment for their work. The village infrastructure remains poor; had it been better, they could have travelled to neighbouring towns in search of work. They all wanted to earn more and be able to send their children to private schools in nearby towns.

The urge for change and development was very clearly visible among the women.

Rajasthan

Block Printing in Bagru and Sanghener

Both the villages are in western Rajasthan near Jaipur. Both are famous for their cotton block prints. Bagru is especially famous for its designs and red and blue vegetable dyes. Unfortunately, though famous for their distinctive handloom products, the villagers continue to be backward and poor. The dyeing methods have not changed and the craftsmen continue to make dyes only with vegetable ingredients. The whole process takes a long time, raising the cost of the dyed and printed cloth. They urgently need to modernize their craft and try to bring down costs. The entire finishing process takes a long time with much attention to detail. Another cost factor is that all the work is done by hand. Even though the demand is not declining, the supply is constrained by various age old time consuming, labour intensive processes.

Connoisseurs of exclusive printed fabrics still come to these villages as they get exactly what they need. Bagru products are specially sought after because of the unique vegetable dyes they use. They have also developed a process to make the dyes mud resistant.

The villages are bereft of any proper infrastructure facilities for the resident families.

Hand made Paper products near Jaipur—Kagzi family enterprise

The Kagzi brothers own the two adjacent units producing paper products near Jaipur. The paper items are of very fine quality, and are exported in the form of paper boxes, note books, hat boxes, gift wrapping papers, and a host of other very imaginatively created gift items. These paper items are very much in demand throughout EU and the USA and the Kagzi brothers are doing extremely well. The paper is made by recycling old cotton cloth and rags. They are soaked in water, shredded, flattened and dyed—all by hand—to make the thick and textured paper of high quality. No wood is used and no trees felled, making it a fine example of an eco-friendly venture.

The entire work is done manually by trained labour under strict quality control at every stage of manufacture.

The designing and research department is doing an excellent job in keeping track of the latest trends. They advertise their products through an eye catching colour brochure. The variety, colour, texture, embossing and the fine finish they give to the paper is all very highly impressive.

The Kagzi brothers' venture has all the elements of successful business—enterprise, working skills, imaginative designing and active market research. No wonder the enterprise has won many awards and is an example of how handcrafted Indian products can be sold across the globe. It is a telling contrast to the hand block printed fabrics unit nearby.

Kerala

Wooden boxes in Thiruvananthapuram

A box manufacturing unit, 'Malabar Crafts' located at Kalay, Karamana, near Thiruvananthapuram manufactures 'nettor' or jewellery boxes made of rosewood or jackfruit, painted in bright colours and embellished with brass. The wood is locally available (through agents) and the brass embellishments are made in nearby foundries.

The unit we visited is a family unit with father, son and an employee and they were producing 15 to 20 pieces a month. The cost of the boxes range from Rs.600 to Rs. 2500 depending on the nature and size of the box and it gave an income of Rs.5000 per person per month. The master craftsman got his training from Kerala Handicrafts Development Corporation. The unit was started with a loan of Rs.25, 000 in 1992 from the Central Bank of India, which over a period of time



has been raised to Rs.2.5 lakh. The owner had no difficulty in getting the loan from the bank. The unit marketed its products mostly through the Kerala Handicraft Development Corporation emporium. The money is realized only after the sale of the product, which takes around 2 to 3 months. There were only three such units making boxes in the town. The main complaint was that rosewood supply was limited because of the Forest Department restrictions. The proprietor said that rosewood was being exported to China, which was making such boxes and other items and selling them cheaper because they were not fully handmade.

Conclusions:

The two contrasting impressions that stays etched in one's mind after travelling through the villages all over India is the country's rich, artistic heritage kept alive by rural artisans on the one hand and, on the other, the pervasive poverty and the miserable living and working conditions of those very artisans and their families. What needs to be done urgently stares you in the face: efforts have to be made to lift the handicraft and handloom workers out of poverty by improving both the living and working conditions, the first step being to increase their wages to an acceptable amount, close to the minimum wages.

The local skill and talent can be nurtured and goods in demand can be made in the villages, opening up employment opportunities for the rural youth. It should be the national endeavor to preserve India's unique cultural heritage by organizing and boosting the dynamic growth of these traditional crafts, so that their exports touch a new high. Also, adding utility value to the items would substantially increase its domestic demand.

Handicrafts sector is essentially skill and labour intensive, requiring minimal investment and mechanical infrastructure. The bulk of the work is done by the less privileged rural people of the society—i.e., women, SC, ST and OBC or people from the minority community, as also children. That they need to be lifted up from the underprivileged status is self evident. With a little training, most women can be made adept at making handicraft items. The local availability of the relatively inexpensive natural raw materials is a big plus point in their favour, besides the fact that it is eco friendly. These factors will add up to a vital selling point both at home and abroad.

But first and foremost, the conditions of work and the standard of living of the rural workers have to be improved with state supported policies that bring them under a social safety net. I am not going into a critique of the present government

policies. Many are helpful and many are not so helpful. Much more thinking is needed to find ways to ensure a decent livelihood for handicraft and handloom workers, keeping in mind the special needs of various crafts.

There are fundamental issues that need to be worked out, such as: hours of work; minimum wages; safety measures and minimum standards of hygiene and health safeguards. The production base of most self employed workers has to be broadened and this can happen only when they become financially savvy and are able to access credit for their working capital. Skill upgradation is urgently needed to enable the workers to cater to changes in demand and the latest market trends. We found that all educated workers who had access to capital were doing very well and catering to a rising demand for their products.

There are, however, many factors working against the unorganized and semi-literate workers who have been poor for generations. The salient factors are:

- (i) Competition from mill and factory made products that are cheaper and often more attractive;
- (ii) Rise in competition from China (among other countries), especially in textiles, clay and wooden items, in which the Chinese have a cost advantage because most of their goods are machine made, though they are made to look like handicrafts. Lax quality control—foreign buyers persistently complain that Indian goods lack a basic standard of uniform quality.
- (iii) Lack of easy access to bank credit. The bureaucratic apathy of the bank staff is a big discouragement to crafts persons seeking loans.
- (iv) Procedural delays in the passing down of Central and state assistance to the implementing agencies. The RBI gives funds for handicrafts and handloom sector to the state's exchequer, which hands over the money to the Directorate of Handicrafts and they in turn give it to the agency concerned. The funds are released in installments, given as advances and the balance is given in the form of reimbursements, which further compounds the difficulties in the final payment.
- (v) NGOs, cooperative societies and other implementing agencies themselves being financially weak, find it difficult to meet even the residual payments and have to approach banks for loans. The cumbersome procedures of the banks act as a deterrent.

- (vi) The semi literate artisans are generally ignorant about their states' various schemes and programmes, as also about the weak institutional entities such as the state handicraft corporations and state apex societies that are usually short of funds or inactive, or both.
- (vii) Poverty, malnutrition and ill health are the common denominators for the rural workers—men and women and children. For them, problems of chronic poverty outweigh any other considerations and expecting them to put their minds to innovative ideas would show a very shallow understanding of their plight. Terms like 'market trends' and 'markets abroad' have been and will remain beyond their comprehension as long as their minds stay bogged down with problems related to poverty.
- (viii) Only those artisans who are somewhat educated (and probably a little better off) have seen success and developed the will to chase the banks for loans and expand their business to the extent that they can employ workers including a person for quality control.
- (ix) There is need for technical support at every stage to reduce the production costs.
- (x) Improve the infrastructure of the handicraft clusters by building proper workshops, showrooms and roads and by providing facilities like power transportation, marketing places. This would make the clusters into active hubs for sales and for taking orders, and lengthen their outreach especially for clients from cities and abroad.
- (xi) Availability of raw materials is a major problem forcing the artisans to succumb to the pressures of the money lender who not only gives them personal loans but also supplies them with raw materials, giving him the clout to buy up the products at incredibly low prices.
- (xii) The workers have little bargaining power because they are not able to market the goods themselves. The middlemen offer services that are convenient but exploitative. Wherever marketing of products has been easy, the artisans have prospered.
- (xiii) There has to be extensive promotional campaigns through media to create a taste for handicrafts and handlooms within India and abroad. There is bound to be a rise in demand for many of the handicraft items from hotels and offices, besides homes. But there will be tough competition from the sleek, machine made designer goods.

- (xiv) Designers, if they are environmentally conscious, can integrate hand made pieces into their products. It is a world industry worth \$100 billion, but India's share is less than 2 per cent.
- (xv) Bringing the workers together into groups will lead to their empowerment and self reliance. Such self help formations can be motivated and assisted to address issues relating to input materials, marketing, access to credit and draw benefits from various government schemes.
- (xvi) To promote the products, reference manuals, directories, handbooks with pictures of the products by a few selected master craftsmen can be helpful, as has been done by Rajasthan's Kagzi Brothers. Of course, starting a dedicated website would mean opening an instant window for the entire world, giving detailed and comprehensive data on what the country's world of craft has on offer.
- (xvii) Patents and hall marking are a must for protecting the designs from being plagiarized and copied.

As in all the other sectors, the handicraft and handloom sector is also plagued by corruption, further worsening the working conditions of the poor and unlettered artisans. Transparency is required in all government sponsored schemes and the craftsmen have to be made to understand the benefits that accrue to them. All the people we met were eager to do better and earn more, but somehow did not know how to go about it.

Child labour was more a rule than exception in the poorest of villages, as would be expected—school dropouts helping their parents earn more. Only when the parents earn enough can they think of sending their children to school. No doubt the government agencies have to keep a strict control on child labour, but more importantly, it must be understood that the malaise would be eradicated by the parents themselves when their monetary situation improves, for it is not only the rich that want their children to be educated.



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