5 THE CRAFTS COMMUNITY TODAY

Despite all the government schemes and policies, and the efforts of non-government and government agencies, the condition of crafts in India is far from desirable. From the swift diminishing of raw materials or the natural resources that the craftsperson is dependent on to practise his/her craft to the limited capital available to him/her to invest in the expansion or even just the maintenance of his business; to the shrinking marketplace—increasingly flooded with inexpensive factory-made fabric, Chinese toys, plastic mats or stainless steel *ghadas,* the craftsman's economic situation has become increasingly precarious over the past 100 years.

This chapter analyses the reasons why the condition and the status of the crafts community today is so poor.

Attitudes That Colour Our Perception of the Craftsperson

The first reason for the poor status of the crafts community lies in our understanding of crafts and the role of crafts in our society. How do people view the craftsperson: Is he an artist or merely a labourer? Was the Taj Mahal built by an artist or by the crafts community? Is craft mainly manual work or is it a skill-based activity that brings together the hand, the head and the heart? The attitude today towards crafts and the crafts community is the first stumbling block hindering the progress of crafts in India.

Where women have chosen to embroider for a living, they make a clear bifurcation between commercial and traditional handwork. The two are different entities, and do not directly overlap. Rules and standards for each are distinct. Yet, working with the market does affect how a woman feels about herself as an artisan and as a member of her society.

The first and perhaps the biggest impact of commercial work is the separation of design, or art, and craft, or labour. Artisans are asked to make what someone else tells them to make, rather than work from their own sense of aesthetics. When presented with a set of four alien coloured threads, Rabari women baulked. If we use these, it won't be Rabari, they said. In traditional work, there is no distinct separation of colour, stitch, pattern and motif; these work together in units. Design intervention separates these elements and juxtaposes them in new ways.

When design is reserved for a professional designer and craft is relegated to the artisan, the artisan is reduced to a labourer.

– JUDY FRATER
Threads and Voices

For centuries Indian handicrafts have been distinguished for their great aesthetic and functional qualities. In ancient times designers in India were generally the *shilpis.* Groups of artisans or craftsmen worked under the guidance of such *shilpis*, and belonged to various guilds and regional schools throughout the country. It was their fine sensibility and extraordinary skill that invested our handicrafts with remarkable power, design and beauty.

Those categories of crafts that have their origins in the Mughal *durbar* or court also reveal a remarkable refinement of design. The work of these craftspeople was patronised by the court and the nobility. In these crafts the designs were very often influenced by the court paintings and miniature art derived from Persian or indigenous sources. Such motifs can be seen in Indian carpets, brocades, papier-mâché, stone-inlay and so on. It is a unique quality of Indian handicrafts that, very often, the separate abilities and skills of several craftsmen of varying degrees of specialisation and skill

are involved in the designing and making of an object. Thus the designer or master craftsman visualised the complete design—solving problems by developing innovative new ideas of form, proportion and colour.

There are, however, many crafts where the craftsman both designs and executes the product himself, particularly in the area of pottery, wall decoration, embroidery of certain types, toys, and basketry. There are many other crafts where the entire family or *karkhana* or artisans' workshop are involved. In each case the central idea is that the master craftsperson is designer, creator and producer in India.

The Indian words for handicrafts are *hastakala*, *hastashilpa*, *dastkari* or *karigari*, all of which mean handiwork, but they refer to objects made with craftsmanship, ie., specialised skills of the hands which are also artistic. The aesthetic content is an intrinsic part of such objects and means the object of utility has a value that goes beyond mere usage and is also pleasing to the eye. A handcrafted object is seldom merely decorative, and whether it has no embellishment or is highly decorative, its true purpose is served only when it is both useful and has a fine form.

– from *Living Craft Traditions of India*,
Textbook in Heritage Crafts for Class XI, NCERT

CRAFT AND THE MACHINE

The term for art and craft were synonymous in India before the colonial period. In India the crafts community was recognised as a crucial and important part of society on whom the development and enhancement of life depended. In Europe, with the introduction of machines, the role of the crafts community dwindled and crafts completely disappeared. Household utility items that had once been made by the crafts community are now mass produced by machines. Work done by the hand was considered inferior to intellectual work. Machines replaced handiwork that was seen to be both demeaning and backward.

Two individuals who alerted the world to this tragic misconception were William Morris and John Ruskin. Their denunciation of the machine as "destroyer of the joy of hand-work" in the 1850s led to the commencement of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England. They wrote extensively to remind people that human begins are fundamentally creative and that machines were taking away the joy of life. Their writing greatly influenced many thinkers in India thus causing a new interest and study of craft traditions in India.

TIMELY DOCUMENTATION

Owen Jones's book, *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856, documented the principles of good design in which there were examples of Persian, Indian, 'Hindoo' ornaments. Jones was also involved in arranging the great exhibitions in London in 1851 in which the best and most extravagant of Indian crafts were displayed to "help England to improve the poor quality of British craftsmanship that was suffering the damages of industrialisation."

The notion that India was an uncivilised country with a stagnant economy, with a traditional way of life that had not changed for centuries was sought to be dispelled by such exhibitions and exposure of the British public to great Indian crafts. In turn the exhibitions held in England led to greater interest in high quality Indian crafts.

Fortunately, during this period some British officers undertook the documentation of traditional skills, tools, workplaces, objects; encyclopaedias were assembled; census, mapping and surveys were conducted. These records proved priceless resources for contemporary Indian designers and for craft revival programmes in post-industrial India. Despite the detrimental effect of the colonial economy on Indian crafts, the documentation of crafts by British officers during this time had important consequences.

In a book published in 1880, *Industrial Arts of India*, George C.M. Birdwood documented the state of the textile crafts of his time in Bengal. He mentions that cotton

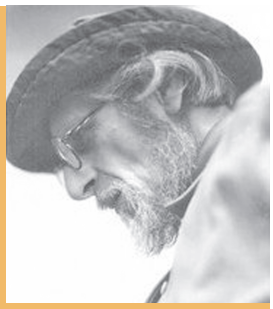
and silk cloth were manufactured in Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and Assam. Dacca (now in Bangladesh) was then a major textile centre.

A rare muslin was formerly produced in Dacca, which when laid wet on the grass became invisible; and because it thus became indistinguishable from the evening dew it was named *shabnam*, i.e., 'the dew of evening'. Another kind was called *ab-rawan*, or 'running water', because it became invisible in water.

The Birdwood Journal of Industrial Arts of India, which was published following a decision in 1880 by the British Government to document Indian handicrafts, is also a valuable source of design and craft material even today.

Birdwood's opposition to industrialisation in India led him to believe that the greatness of Indian crafts was a result of the "happy religious organisation of the Hindu village" where every house of potters, weavers, coppersmiths and jewellers produced essential items of "unrivalled excellence".

Ananda Coomaraswamy



"The craftsman is not an individual expressing individual whims, but a part of the universe, giving expression to ideals of central beauty and unchanging laws, even as do the trees and flowers whose natural and less ordered beauty is no less God-given." Thus wrote Ananda Coomaraswamy of India's craftsmen, whose excellence has never been in dispute.

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1974), a Sri Lankan, is considered among the greatest historians of Indian arts and crafts. After graduating in Geology and becoming the Director of the Mineralogical Survey he formed the Ceylon Social Reformation Society and led a movement to highlight national education, teaching the vernacular language in all schools and reviving Indian culture of which he had deep knowledge and had a high regard for. In1938 he became the Chairman of the National Committee for India's Freedom. He contributed greatly towards people's understanding of Indian philosophy, religion, art and iconography, painting and literature, music, science and Islamic art. In his book, *The Indian Craftsman,* Coomaraswamy speaks about the corrupting influences of modernisation on the craftsman and the influences of European rule, and urges a return to the idealised pre-industrialised life in India.

In August 1947 he made a memorable statement: "India's culture is of value. Not so much because it is Indian but because it is culture".

It is interesting to note that Kamaladevi met Coomaraswamy at the Boston Museum in the U.S.A. where he headed the Oriental Section. She wrote of him: "Ananda Coomaraswamy had meant to us something special as a unique interpreter of our cultural tradition because of the totality of his vision that never blurred. So much like Gandhiji he treated culture as a significant index to the social organism".

THE DIVIDE BETWEEN ART AND CRAFT

The initial impact of the Industrial Revolution and the aftermath of the revolt of 1857 and British political control of India resulted in the setting up of a number of institutions. The Archaeological Survey of India and the Asiatic Society, Kolkata were established as interest in Indian art and culture grew. The first important museum to be established was the Indian Museum in Calcutta, in 1857. The earliest Indian museums had separate sections for art and archaeology, as well as galleries for geology, zoology and anthropology where craft items of antiquity were displayed. Museums provided safe storage and preservation of antiquities and their collection offer a unique opportunity to study and research craft traditions.

After 1857 the British established schools of art in Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai. The art schools followed the English syllabus that taught students the principles of western art of perspective, still-life drawing and landscape painting. Oil paintings soon replaced traditional forms of Indian painting. Students trained in the Western style of art entered the scene; Indian elite and royalty exposed to Western art patronised this westernised Indian art. Thus was born the division between art and craft in India. This led to a further fall in status of the Indian crafts community who had so loyally served Indian society for centuries.

The products of the textile mills, printing presses and India's first factories replaced handcrafted objects at home. Imported concepts taught in westernised art schools were totally divorced from the unifying philosophy of the Indian tradition which brought art, craft, architecture, design and manufacture together. A few brave efforts to turn learning towards indigenous inspiration were attacked as stratagems to deny Indians the rewards of western progress.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some political and social reformers recognised the importance of handicraft industries as a channel of economic regeneration and cultural confidence in the face of the colonial onslaught. Their vision inspired poet Rabindranath Tagore's craft experiments at his university in Santiniketan, and the emphasis on village industry with which Mahatma Gandhi provided a foundation for India's struggle towards independence.

As described in detail in Chapter 3, in the early years of the twentieth century, crafts became a catalyst for political thought and action. The *swadeshi* movement ('by Indians, for Indians') attempted to restore the dignity of labour and human creativity. A simple craft tool—the spinning wheel—became the symbol of national revolt, and hand-spun cloth, the livery of freedom.

The handloom revolution which followed was accompanied by the promotion of village industries and by a national awareness of the need to protect and

enhance traditional skills, products and markets within a new industrial environment.

BOUND BY CASTE

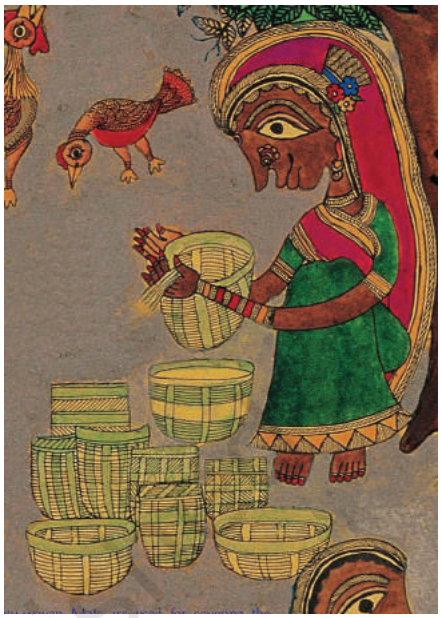
Gandhiji had hoped that with the attainment of Independence the notion of caste would gradually disappear, but this failed to happen and the status of the craftsperson as manual labourer fell further.

Today, even though social mobility is on the increase, heredity, caste and community affiliations continue to play an important role in the crafts sector. The association between particular castes/communities and artisanal activities still seems to be strongest in the case of pottery, metal work, leather work, cane and bamboo work. Where the number of first-generation workers is small, caste and community barriers are breaking down gradually, specifically in relatively dynamic manufacturing activities, such as tailoring and woodwork, which are attracting a large number of first-generation workers.

While many of the oppressive features of the colonial and pre-colonial periods are missing today, a large segment of the artisanal population lives in abject poverty. Not surprisingly, many artisans are giving up their traditional occupations, and taking up other forms of work, mostly unskilled, daily-wage labour, which assures them higher returns. The trend was confirmed by the survey conducted by the NGO, SRUTI, in 1987–88, which revealed that in more than half the traditional leather artisan households, several family members had given up leather-work, and were working as casual labourers.

Today weavers form the largest section of the rural poor. Ironically, our history books tell us that they were once among India's wealthiest professionals. Weaving guilds were once wealthy enough to sponsor the building of major temples in South India, and even maintained their own armies.

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY



The most neglected aspects in the past have been the poor income and working conditions of craftspeople. How many people in this country are aware that the craftsperson earns less than the average Indian factory worker? Indeed, in some cases, he/she cannot even find sustained work or employment through the year. Most handicraft artisans work in their own homes and many are dependent on a consistent supply of raw material. This may depend on the season or on their outlay. A bad agricultural season will naturally deplete the resource and production of crafts. Added to this a landless crafts community is market-dependent and hence extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in the market situation.

Torch-bearers of India's crafts traditions, inheritors of ancient technologies and cultural systems, artists and creators living within a binding community ethos, producers in an agro-based economy, and philosophers who accept the link between the spiritual and the material—these are the many roles which craftspeople play. Yet, despite their long history and the plethora of plans and schemes evolved for them by various governments since India's Independence, there may be no more than a few thousand craftspeople who are comfortably placed both socially and economically. The rest eke out their livelihoods at bare subsistence level.

A census does not reliably ensure coverage of seasonal artisans or those skilled artisans who have been marginalised in rural areas and forced to shift to city slums in search of alternative employment. Handloom weavers in Delhi share space with rag-pickers, some produce rag durries or embroider quilts with scraps of cloth obtained from tailoring establishments. Itinerant grass-mat weavers and basket-makers work in empty fields or on crowded city pavements and are seldom enumerated. As part-time or leisure-time craftspeople, they still form a part of a productive economy even if their status remains low and their incomes merely assure one full meal a day for each member of the family.

The average income derived from handwork, as found in our profiles, is ₹ 2,000 per month for an average family of five members. This amounts to ₹ 13.50 per day per head. It may be pertinent to note here that in a reply to a question in

Parliament in 1997, the Ministry of Home Affairs stated that it cost the exchequer ₹48.60 per day to provide the basic requirements, including food, for a prisoner lodged in Delhi's Tihar jail. When posed with this fact many a craftsman and woman fell into rueful thought and commented, not without a sense of humour, whether a spell in jail were not better than a life of craftwork.

– JAYA JAITLY
Visvakarma's Children

The artisans' incomes are exceedingly low. In 1987–88, the average annual income of artisans, interviewed by SRUTI, from their artisanal activities was ₹4,899. The group-wise average varied from a low of ₹2,219, in the case of cane and bamboo workers, to a high of ₹7,018 in that of wood-workers. The surveys also suggest that artisans own hardly any assets. The major asset owned is a house, more often

than not, *kuccha*, or made of mud. The incidence of landlessness is high: 61 per cent of the artisans in the SRUTI survey did not possess any land whatsoever. In no case did the holding exceed three acres. For most artisans, their inability to invest any surplus income in the purchase of agricultural inputs, makes for poor yields. The other assets most commonly owned by artisans are the tools and tackles of their respective trades. Some of them also own livestock or cattle. Forty-six per cent of the artisanal households surveyed did not have electricity connection.

MAJOR CONSTRAINTS FOR THE CRAFTS COMMUNITY

Apart from social stigma and caste bias, poverty and limited assets there are four major constraints afflicting the crafts community which have been briefly highlighted below.

Disappearing Raw Material

Crafts communities across the country are finding it more and more difficult to find adequate raw material of the right quality. With the depletion of natural resources, they now have to buy scrap and old articles. They are unable to buy sufficient quantities as they lack the requisite capital.

On the next page a story on the shrinking bamboo cultivation and its decimation in the North-east during colonial times, is only symptomatic of the huge crisis of raw materials that the craft industry faces in India today.

But beyond the non-availability of raw material or restriction on its use, the craftsman is completely aware of his symbiotic relationship with nature and his dependency on it for his very survival. For instance, to make colour, women in Bihar never pluck flowers but only use those that have already fallen on the ground, while in Kalamkari painting old, rusty horseshoes are even used to produce certain colours!

The Bamboo Story

Fishing traps, baskets, cradles, biers, bridges, rainproof hats and umbrellas, mats, musical instruments, water pipes—Indians have always used the bamboo in numerous ways. It is used for house construction, fencing and in the making of bullock carts. Low-cost domestic furniture and a vast range of domestic utility items made of bamboo can be easily seen in any of our bazaars. But we do not easily notice the countless little ways this modest material comes to be used by rural people. One can see it being used in the blacksmith's bellows, or as bamboo pins in carpentry joints or in the fabrication of toys in village markets.

But to the British foresters the multidimensional role that "the forest weed bamboo" played in the local Indian environment was of no account, as it did not figure in forest revenues. Bamboo also interfered with the growing of teak, an essential part of their colonial forest policy. It was only in the 1920s that the British realised that by mincing bamboo into millimetre shreds, cooking it in chemicals, pulping and flattening it, they could produce sheets of paper. This would bring the British increased forest revenue and 'development' (as defined by them) to the so-called backward regions of India. However, they chose to ignore the consequences this activity would have on the health of the forest. So while bamboo was sold at high prices to basket weavers, it was heavily subsidised for the paper industry.

Even after Independence, supplying bamboo at extremely low prices to Indian paper mills became a 'patriotic' duty of the government, and bamboo supplies were assured for decades at unchanged prices. The

> For the Apatani of Arunachal Pradesh, and their tribal counterparts across the world, bamboo is everything—tools, weapon, shelter, food, vessel, pipe, music and idol.
>
> – Max Martin
> *Down to Earth*

disaster that this would cause to the forests, and to the craftsperson, still remained unforeseen.

You may recall that in your Class IX history textbook, *India and the Contemporary World–I*, a lot of emphasis was laid on how colonialism affected forests all across India and marginalised their inhabitants and the traditional occupations they practised. As late as the 1970s, the World Bank proposed that 4,600 hectares of natural sal forest should be replaced by tropical pine to provide pulp for the paper industry. It was only after protests by local environmentalists that the project was stopped. Colonialism was therefore not only about repression, it was also a story of displacement, impoverishment and ecological crisis.

The Indian craftsman is therefore conscious of the need to reduce, reuse and recycle, and stay in tune with the local environment that provides him with all the raw materials he needs.

How different this is from the contemporary textile mill or the stainless steel industry that pollutes the soil and local rivers!

A wood-carver from Kerala has this to say: "We go to the forests, and choose an appropriate tree that is not deformed in any way. Then, on the auspicious day and hour, we take offerings of sweets and rice and place them at the foot of the tree. In a prayer, we asks forgiveness from all the creatures, birds, and insects who live in the tree. We assure them that though we are depriving them of their house and food, we will use the wood for a good purpose, not wasting even a scrap of shaving."

– SHOBITA PUNJA
Museums of India

Loss of Patronage

Where traditionally the *jajmani* system of patronage or the local temple, affluent individual, *zamindar* or petty raja usually supported the craftsman through the year or in periods of crisis—the modern state machinery fails to do so. Dependent on a face-to-face relationship, developed over the generations, the rural potter, blacksmith or even musician knew that he played a key role in the social fabric. The story narrated below explains the relationship of traditional musicians of Rajasthan and their hereditary patrons.

Among the best known of all the clans of professional folk musicians in our country are those from Rajasthan—the Langas and Mangniyars of the Thar desert.

The most fascinating aspect of both these communities is the patronage they receive generation after generation from the same families. A Mangniyar who sings for a particular family is called a dhani. He must be paid a certain sum whenever a major event like a birth, a marriage or a death occurs in his patron's family, and he will have to perform. This dhani right is hereditary—so if he is attached to fifty families and has two sons, each one of his sons will become the dhani to twenty-five of these families and so on! Even family members who do not perform are entitled to a certain fixed payment.

But there are also some absolutely unique aspects to this relationship. Can you believe that if a performer is unhappy with his patron, he can 'divorce' him? In fact, in such a situation, the word 'talaq', ('divorce' in Urdu) is used!. As a first step of registering his protest, the performer stops singing the verses that are in honour of the patron's family. If this has no impact, the performers bury their turbans in the sand outside the patron's house. If even this has no impact, they proceed to bury the strings of their instruments outside the patron's house!

This is seen as being the last straw—an indication that the Langa or Mangniyar will never again contribute musically to any of the ceremonies in the patron's household. Often this results in serious consequences for the patron—who would now find it difficult to get his sons and daughters married, or would even find himself the laughing stock of the local society as he is parodied through abusive songs by the angry musicians!

Credit Facilities

By contrast, today's craftsman may find support in a small cooperative he belongs to, or from a distant buyer in some other part of the world who may buy his product over the Internet, but, by and large, he now has to fend for himself, attempting to find support occasionally in terms of bank loans, especially after a disaster (like an earthquake or tsunami) or the occasional craft bazaar in another part of the country—all supported by the State.

Crafts communities need working capital to develop their product, buy raw material, improve their tools and supply new markets. There are few credit facilities or insurance policies for the unorganised sector. Craftsmen need easy credit to free themselves from moneylenders. More liberalised credit schemes need to be offered by banks to get them out of debt and help them to invest in crafts revival.

Traditional and Local Markets

Crafts communities can no longer produce their traditional goods at prices that the poor rural consumer can afford. The poverty of the consumer and rural poor is such that traditional craftspersons are losing their largest clients and are thus divorced from the creative process of innovating for known clients and their needs.

Literacy and Education

The craftsperson in India clearly defines the difference between education and literacy. The craftsperson is skilled and is the repository of an unbroken but evolving tradition. Such a definition is used for one who is educated and talented. However the same person skilled in his craft is not able to read or write, rendering him

illiterate. Our craftspersons need both continuous education and literacy to face the challenges of the future.

For real progress it is imperative that the artisan becomes literate. This important aspect of his/her development should be part of a larger skill training scheme. We shall be failing in our duty to crafts and society if young people, while receiving training in crafts, in private or government centres, are not simultaneously provided facilities for adequate literacy. Literacy is critical in the process of increasing production and marketing, availing bank loans and understanding individual rights and preventing exploitation by other classes.

For the next generation of craftspeople, programmes and projects need to be developed to enhance leadership qualities within the crafts community, provide assistance in improving technology, increasing production, creating better working conditions and raising the economic standard of craftsmen. Craftspeople need to learn how to understand new clients and their requirements, how to maintain quality in their products. They need to learn what new raw material they could experiment with. Health, schooling, adequate shelter and work space is the right of every citizen in this country. For it is indisputable that craft activity cannot progress without our craftsmen receiving attention, care and recognition. It is only then that we may expect crafts to transmit their vitality and grace on to the future.

In ancient India, crafts and art were one—both synonymous, both an integral part of home, worship and everyday life, not segregated into gallery displays or marketplace commerce.

– LAILA TYABJI

Bringing back crafts into the daily life of the majority of Indians would be the first step to reinstate craftspersons in their rightful position in society. Nurturing skilled educated young craftspeople is the next step to ensuring a respectable position for crafts tradition in India in the future.

EXERCISE

1. How can craftspeople recover their status and esteemed place in the present economic situation?
2. Write a short article about harmful child labour keeping in mind the following:
   - economic exploitation
   - long working hours
   - loss of educational and recreational opportunities
   - health hazards—accidents, illness, violence, harmful effects of chemicals
   - abuse and exploitation—emotional and mental.
3. Write a speech on 'Disappearing Raw Material' for the local communiy. Describe the contributions of crafts to your state in the context of Indian culture. Describe the reasons for the loss of raw material and the consequences of the loss.
4. Ivory, shahtoosh and sandalwood are all banned items. Design a strategy for a 'sting operation' to expose this illegal trade.
5. Develop a lesson plan for the primary school for children of craftspersons that would help them to learn a literacy skill like writing or arithmetic. Link family craft in an interesting way.
6. The close connection between the craftspeople and the raw material they use is reflected in several local traditions. Research and describe one such tradition/ ritual/ceremony/festival in detail.