



Traditional Handicrafts of India- Issues and Challenges : A Swot Analysis

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ABSTRACT

India is land of beautiful handicrafts that are being practiced since time immemorial. Currently the country has a large population of craftsmen practicing diverse crafts from north to south and east to west. Every place has its own crafts depending on its own available resources and local needs. But in the age of globalisation there is a dire need to provide a greater and larger market for these handicraft products. Being one of largest unorganised sector in terms of employment generation, handicraft sector could not succeed to make its place where it should have been. Therefore, a study with the overall objective to find out the current status of traditional handicraft sector in India and to provide suggestions for improvement in its present status, was carried. It is a micro- level investigative and descriptive study that has utilised information obtained from few informal interviews of craftsmen participating in all India Handicraft Mela organised by Uttar Pradesh government in collaboration with government of India in the year 2020. In addition, information and data from the secondary sources such as previous researches and literature as well as government reports was also used for drawing inferences. SWOT analysis of the obtained data and information was done under results and discussion section. Results provided useful and practical solutions for the better future of industry, craftsmen and their families.

Key words: Traditional crafts; Handicrafts; Heritage craft; SWOT analysis.

Craftsmanship and crafts persons have always been highly praised and given special place in Indian economy, society and culture. Megasthenese, the Greek diplomat of Seleucus Nicator in the court of emperor Chandragupta Maurya, has explained the importance of craftsmen in ancient India in detail. He has mentioned in his writings (Indica) that craftsmen were placed at a higher rung of the society due the skills and utility of their workmanship (Kumar, 2015). Many studies done on Vedas and Upnishads also talk about importance of handicrafts in India (Chattopadhyay, K., 1975). Initially

many of the traditional painters were associated with social ceremony and use to paint on façade of village houses or on scrolls as part of a traditional gesture of the ceremony (Ranjan and Ranjan, 2007).

In a way each and every village was a complete economically independent unit and perhaps this was the key to India's enormous economic wealth in the past. During the British Colonial rule most of these handicrafts and handloom industries were either languished or came on the verge of extinction due to their brutal policies. However, after independence, the leadership of the

country and people working for the cause of craftsman and crafts tried to revive and promote many handicrafts. As a result of these relentless efforts, today Indian handicrafts industry is one of the largest unorganized sector industries after agriculture and textiles that provides huge employment in rural and semi urban setup. It is one of the major export segments of India. It not only generates substantial foreign exchange but also helps in sustaining lives of thousands and lakhs of people and their families belonging to the craftsmen community or associated in some or other way to the handicrafts industry.

Research carried out on multiple aspects of this area also raised several valid questions that needed answer. They also provided the basis for drawing conclusions and providing suggestions.

Goswami and Jain (2014), conducted a study of two government organisation associated with Rajasthan Government- Rajasthan Handloom Development Corporation (RHDC) and Rajasthan Rajya Bunkar Sahkari Sangh (RRBSS). They found that these agencies do not follow any specialized strategies at product planning stage or for procuring raw material.

Another key issue raised was related to Geographical Indicator (GI) in the research by *K. Das* in 2010, that called for immediate attention to focus on coordinated efforts for improved inter- departmental linkages to avoid any kind of duplication of efforts and thereby optimizing returns. Also, it is expected to support in facilitating the utilization of the potential of GIs in commercial and socio-economic domain as well as protection of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) of India's knowledge wealth of craftsmanship and related methods, materials and techniques.

Further, buying behaviour of the prospective customer is extremely essential to balance the cycle of demand and supply. An analysis (*Deshmukh, 2013*), of responses obtained from target customers on Handicraft products available at Urban Haat (a permanent setup as marketing place where artisans can directly sell their products bypassing the middle men) setup by CIDCO, (City and industrial Development Corporation) Maharashtra was done. Results revealed that though the middle-class male and female have a better influence on the purchase of handicrafts, however, the requirements for such product do not become compelling to them due to high prices of these products

and many other reasons. Thus, *Akshita Agrawal (April-June, 2021)* suggests that, "bringing awareness about various handicrafts amongst consumers and easy availability of authentic original products directly from the crafts person are some of the solutions to enhance demand for and sale of these products". Findings of the study conducted by *Jain (2016)* supports the fact that, "there is lots of duplicity and wrong information about the authentic handicraft project"s.

Another important factor that came to notice was growing interest of youth towards the popularity of western art. This has led to the ignorance of craftsmanship and speciality of Indian traditional handicrafts often by the customers and general public. As a consequence, many of the finest crafts and ancient traditional techniques have either disappeared or are on the verge of disappearance. Therefore, *Jain (2016)* recommends, "Revival of arts and crafts specially in urban spaces,"¹² where people have better purchasing power. He further calls for "A continued need to preserve and protect skill set and knowledge of traditional handicrafts as an urgent action"

Use of IT and digital platforms has become quite popular medium for the promotion and sales of handicrafts these days. This has enhanced global visibility of Indian traditional handicrafts. Its use has been found effective and time tested. Long back in 1970 *W. Benjamin* had suggested for "the use of new media and technologies to make people aware about their traditional handicrafts and cultural heritage along with making them available even at remotest locations"

Several studies have shown close links of various village crafts with the ancient past of India (*Chattopadhyay, K., 1975*); *Gupta, A.C., 1959*; *Karve, D. G., 1995*; *Khosla, D. N., 1959*). "These Village handicrafts dates back to Vedic period and their repeated references as an extraordinary contributor in Indian trade and commerce are well documented in Veda's and Upnishads" (*Upadhyay, M. N., 1973*). These traditional crafts also contribute in preserving the cultural heritage as *K.M. Munshi (1970)* advocates for "the preservation of handicrafts as an essential condition for holding any country's social structure based on traditional values intact".

Thus, economic factor evolved as a pertinent element impacting social aspect of life tremendously. *Sudha, V. & Krishnaveni, M. (2012)*, in their study

revealed about, “the importance of small-scale handicraft industries in the promotion of nation’s economy over the last five decades and threw light on its export potential”. A study carried out to see the economic and social significance of handicraft industry of Botswana proved “an overall positive impact of handicrafts on the people working in this sector as well as on their families and communities. This is more relevant for rural areas where people have no or little formal education and belong to marginalised groups of society” (Terry, M. E., 2017). For instance, the Kashmiri handicraft sectors mainly based in valley, has earned a unique place in the world of handicrafts trade and contributes immensely in sustaining the state’s economy” (Ranjan, A., & Ranjan, M. P., (2007). “Kashmiri handicrafts Industry, especially woven and embroidered shawls and handwoven carpets which are renowned worldwide for their fine craftsmanship have exceptionally good export potential as rare and valuable commodity. Promotion of this could help many women and their families to come out of poverty” (Darakhshan, A., 2011; Yasmin, E. & J. I. Khan., 2013).

The sector has great potential in terms of contribution in the economy of any nation as M. E., Terry (2017) argues that “the non- craft sector being bigger in size provides more overall income but craft sector has shown better economic efficiency than the non- craft sector” (Terry, M. E., 2017).

One of the crucial things for the success and sustenance of any handicraft lies in its marketing strategies and network development. Several studies done in this area shows that lack of market awareness is the major lacuna for the failure or poor show of these village enterprises (Thiamani, K. K., 1987), or cottage industries and often scattered and insufficient data on productions and sales” (Florence, K. & International Trade Centre WTO., 2005), “These researches recommend “regular studies on diversity of crafts, market surveys to get sufficient data base on the market trends, production and sales so that workable and timely solutions can be provided and quantitative marketing strategies can be developed to solve market related problems, remove obstacles and improve markets for village crafts” (Florence, K. & International Trade Centre WTO., 2005; Khosla, D. N., 1959; Kotler, P., & K. L. Keller, 2012; Layila, T., 2 October, 1994).

“Other worth mentioning gaps that affect directly

the choices in products and sales were poor designs, low quality of material and insufficient market approaches” (Dak, T. M., 1989). Finishing and standardization of products were the other aspects that had overall impact on the handicrafts sector. One example is wooden toys that are still made by hand using traditional tools and techniques and the those that are made by machine. “As a result, this situation goes in favour of machine-made replica of same village crafts produced in urban units. Due to better access to global market these urban units obstruct the growth of village-based units” (Dak, T. M., 1989).

Quality issue was again and again raised in many studies. One such study done by S.K. Hashmi (2013), highlights, “the need of production of high-quality products using indigenous advanced technologies and upgrading present facilities to produce items of international standards. It was also made clear that due to low capital investment, high ratio of value addition and huge scope for foreign exchange earnings as resultant of export potential, the handicraft sector is economically extremely important for the country (Hashmi, S. K., 2013).

Adaptability and diversification in product range and type, cost and customers has also emerged as important point to be considered if one wishes handicraft sector to keep growing. Entrepreneurial ventures and start-ups could be some of the options as mode of operation of such units. However, again certain significant features were found quite important to stick to for the success of any such venture. In research was conducted on contribution of entrepreneurs in dynamics of Hong Kong’s economy by bringing structural changes in their economy. The results clearly portrayed that, “the success was mainly attributed to those entrepreneurs who were largely adaptive to the changing situations, were alert to the opportunities, ensured high degree of flexibility in the production and responded quickly to any change. They did not take much time in shifting from higher cost regions to lower cost regions, their production activity from one to another product, and from one industry to another; for instance, from fishing to agricultural to manufacturing (Yu, F. L. T., March, 2016).

Looking at the findings from the review of researches and the important role of handicraft segment in Indian economy as a medium of livelihood of hundreds

of thousands of craftsmen and their families it was felt necessary to examine the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats to the industry. The study goes a step ahead and provide insight leading to concrete solutions to strengthen economic viability of such projects. The idea was to provide some such guidelines to the policy makers, planners, administrators, managers of small- scale units, entrepreneurs, NGOs that are owners of small-scale unit, exporters after analysing the status that can help the industry to sustain and grow better by avoiding the common mistakes resulting into dreaded industrial sickness or closure of unit. This has been done on the basis of in-depth study of secondary data sources and previous researches and literature available in this area. It is expected that the present study will also help to improve the social status as well as living standards of craftsmen and their families.

Objectives of the study :

1. To understand the current issues and challenges of handicrafts sector in India through SWOT analysis.
2. To suggest solutions and answers to the issues and challenges faced today by handicrafts sector.

METHODOLOGY

This was a micro- level investigative and descriptive study based on information obtained from few informal interviews of craftsmen participating in all India handicraft mela organised by Uttar Pradesh government in collaboration with government of India in 2020 along with the information and data from the secondary sources such as previous researches and literature as well as governments reports and statistics. This information has not only been used for SWOT analysis but also for drawing inferences, making conclusion and giving suggestions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before going for SWOT analysis, it is important to understand the nature of these handicrafts and materials used for creating handcrafted products.

The information sources revealed that these handicraft products have certain noteworthy features. These are given as under-

- a. Labour intensive
- b. Purely hand skill based i.e., even if tools are used, they also need lot of hand control to use them
- c. Involves a great deal of imagination and creativity
- d. Decorative or ornamental purpose

- e. Utilitarian or functional purpose
- f. Socially and religiously have some symbolic significance
- g. Based on traditional technology practiced through generations
- h. Currently handicrafts are highly linked with caste occupation though it may not have been an ancient practice
- i. A significant element of tradition is involved thus reflects cultural continuity

Swot analysis

All the information available was divide into four sections and was placed accordingly under each section. These sections are- Strengths; Weaknesses; Opportunities and Threats.

Strengths

Identified strengths of handicraft sector of India found are given as under -

- i. Huge existing pool of artisans in the country
- ii. Reliance on locally available skills-
- iii. Manual labour with minimum dependency of machines
- iv. Skills passed on from one to another generation
- v. Low production cost
- vi. Generally acquired outside the formal school system
- vii. High potential for empowerment of weaker sections like women, people with disabilities and poor or socially discriminated ones

Weaknesses

Identified weaknesses of handicraft sector of India found are given as under-

- i. Unorganised sector and highly fragmented industry thus, lack of strong umbrella sector organizations
- ii. Unregulated competitive market
- iii. Lack of adequate infrastructure
- iv. Unstructured and individualized production systems
- v. Absence of latest technology
- vi. Limited resources for production, distribution and marketing
- vii. Lack of design, innovation and technology up gradation
- viii. Limited access to credit
- ix. Limited e-commerce competence among producer groups

- x. Limited capitalization and low investment
- xi. Insufficient market information on export trends, opportunities and prices

Opportunities :

Identified opportunities are given as under -

- i. Rising demand in domestic and traditional market
- ii. Increasing emphasis on product development and design up gradation
- iii. Rising appreciation by consumers in the developed countries
- iv. Fair trade practices
- v. Increasing flow of tourists provide market for products
- vi. Government support and interest in preserving and promoting the craft

Threats

Identified threats are given as under-

- i. Not mainstreamed in planning priority of government for many years
- ii. Threat to small indigenous crafts from technology and mechanization of crafts sector for mass production
- iii. Paucity of institutional support for infrastructure & funds
- iv. Lack of product wise uniform standardization process for quality component
- v. Problem of decreases supply of quality raw material in required amount
- vi. Compromised quality for product development, Research and Development in packaging as compared to other countries
- vii. Increasing competition from other countries especially from Asian countries like Bangladesh
- viii. High transportation cost with in country with high freight in cargo & overseas shipments
- ix. Decreased or less interest of investors in the sector
- x. Lack of competitiveness in the international market due to several reasons
- xi. The new generation is not interested as practicing handicrafts requires very hard work, dedication and longer time to profess but are poorly remunerative in terms of appreciation, market demand and money

CONCLUSION

Other than few, most handicrafts are practiced at

a very small scale and in a specific locality making it more vulnerable to be languished in future. Concepts, such as fair- trade practices are still out of reach from a huge number of crafts persons as their outreach to information is low. Therefore, by making efforts to increase their demand in domestic and traditional market as well as in global market is the need of time. This may be done by more and more exposure of the crafts and craftsmen to the tourists and developed nations who have better purchasing capacity. Though the government is doing a lot for the support and interest in preserving and promoting the craft but still it seems to be insufficient looking at the number of craftsmen and the range of diverse crafts India has. These efforts raise some hope for the better future of these precious crafts and their practitioners. Therefore, not only government but other important stake holders such as NGOs, craftsmen communities and the users, all will have to play their part in the process otherwise we may lose some of the finest crafts acquired through generations in near future. Thus, still there is a long way to go.

Suggestions

Research is needed of fair- trade practices and its impact and coverage. On stop specialized, craftsmanship focused design centre that can provide solutions to problems of design pool, design up gradation and innovation in product development and technology up- gradation needs to be set -up.

Setting up training centres across country focusing craft clusters as well as individual craftsmen practicing different crafts that can provide training to them in the creation, access, and use of e- commerce competencies and connect to them to such market places and sites that are authentic, reliable and honest.

Providing sufficient and updated statistical data and other information on export trends, opportunities and prices of handicrafts.

In-depth researches providing meaningful and practical and pre-tested solution to problem of handicrafts sector for having least investors and limited capitalization needs to be carried out the way they are done for other sectors.

There is an urgent need to develop strong and transparent inter- department linkages involving all the concern departments to avoid any duplicity and get maximum benefits.

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