

# Design Intervention & Craft Revival

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***“To write about Indian handicrafts is almost like writing about the country itself.  
So vast, complex and colourful, and yet with a simplicity and charm, difficult to attain under  
comparable conditions”***

***- Upadhyay, M.N.: Handicrafts of India.***

**Abstract-** The purpose of this paper is to measure if Design intervention helps in the revival of dying crafts and illustrate how interesting ideas and new intervention models can be developed for several purposes, whether for revitalizing a languishing craft or for developing new products to create livelihoods

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is based on a review of the literature and takes a case study approach. The paper aims to suggest that Collaborative innovation between designer and craftspeople is a means of expanding the craft vocabulary and reviving dying craft traditions and tapping contemporary markets.

**Originality/value** – The research will cover 30 Designers / Ngo’s and Craftspeople for Design intervention in the form of questionnaire in certain regions of Kutch to ascertain that a link between the apparently conflicting tenets of sustainability can be achieved through responsible and strategic design intervention which integrates the social, economic, ecological and cultural aspects and thus help in the revival of dying craft traditions.

**Index Terms-** Design Intervention, Craft Revival, Craft traditions

**Paper type-** This paper is an exploratory & conclusive study

## I. INTRODUCTION

### **Background:**

Indian Handicrafts have been a traditional craft and the skill of making handicraft has been passed in families from generation to generation. Millions of Indians still depend on indigenous modes of production, traditional skills and techniques to make a living based on handmade products.

They are unique expressions of a particular culture or community through local craftsmanship and materials. With increased globalization, however, products are becoming more and more commoditized and artisans find their products competing with goods from all over the world.

This demand for a product and change in its style, design, and colour, offer a great threat to craftsmen producers and push

these deep-rooted traditional handmade products out, replacing them with mass, factory-made, machine crafts.

Also one of the biggest issues in India is that our markets do not recognize the true value of craft. When this value is recognized, and if people are willing to pay a higher price for craft based products, this should translate into higher wages for weavers and craftspeople and act as a boost to millions of rural-based livelihood opportunities associated with this sector.

Propelled by loss of markets, declining skills and difficulty catering to new markets, a large number of artisans have moved to urban centres in search of low, unskilled employment in industry.

***“Handicraft is the second largest source of employment in the country, after agriculture. Yet India’s hand industries are in a crisis of misunderstanding.”***

***Crafts council of India-2011***

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

***William Bissel, MD, Fabindia***

The starting point of this research is inspired by the fact that if we accept that crafting objects by hand is one of the defining traits of being human, then our present state of culture in which craft has disappeared in the “overdeveloped” world and is rapidly disappearing in the developing world should cause us to pause and think about what it is that has been lost or is about to disappear.

Craft today is defined by preciousness, and an extraordinary value is attributed to the handmade as an exotic species. In our developing world, it is either considered to be lowly hand-work, or a resurrected practice for the poor to gain access to valuable foreign exchange.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, people in the West fetishize the object, while in our world we romanticize the humble craftsman and his poor condition.

But neither of these approaches really looks past the artefact (as either fetish or commodity) to the role of craft as a catalyst for spurring thought and innovation in society.

We may lament the loss of the beautiful objects we now view in museums, but what if the ultimate value of craft lies not in the artefact but rather in the process by which it comes to be? ( Ken Botnick, Ira Raja, 2011)

And it is this process which seems to be getting lost as the artisans are trained in the art forms by their ancestors over generations and craft was not about making a simple product. Rather, it was about a historic legacy of generations and centuries, a tedious brutal labour and a proud skill, a battle between tradition and industrial modernity, an expression of unique style and a vision of revival, all connected to the heart and spirit of each individual artisan. ( Alexandra Soteriou,1998)

Has Indian design, in fifty years of the country's independence, empowered the crafts community to become "freshly involved and "seek solutions themselves" on how to resolve this problem of designing for new markets? Have designers asked the right questions of the crafts community to lead to such empowerment?

Perhaps it is now time to do so. "With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of development programs."( Poonam Bir Kasturi,2005)

While design intervention in crafts is welcomed by some as a necessity and an opportunity for exploring new prospects and help in craft revival, it is often considered by others as a threat.

It is however argued that a link between the apparently conflicting tenets of sustainability can be achieved through responsible and strategic design innovation which integrates the social, economic, ecological and cultural aspects.

***In short, collaborative innovation between designer and craftsperson is a good means of expanding the Craft vocabulary and tapping contemporary markets.***

## II. DEFINING CRAFT

***““Crafts can be defined as “those activities that deal with the conversion of specific materials into products, using primarily hand skills with simple tools and employing the local traditional wisdom of craft processes.***

***Such activities usually form the core economic activity of a community of people called ‘craftsmen’.” ( Professor M.P. Ranjan )***

One definition states that crafts developed out of necessity to fulfil everyday needs of people. The products and objects made were for personal use and were instrumental in expressing their individuality and their way of life. The very act of creation gave a new meaning to their life, to their self expression and to the rituals, and also helped to develop an aesthetic sensibility. In the Indian context crafts have been both for personal use and an expressional fulfilment and economic activity. It evolved out of being a product of use, then was ornamented and given an aesthetic appeal to it. ( Dhamija, 1979).

A craftsperson is one who is skilled in a craft technique and though he may produce a number of similar objects, each one however expresses the maker's creativity. (Jasleen Dhamija-2003)

It can also be defined as a personal journey of the craftsperson where the main objective is self expression. The personalization, imperfections imparted because of hand work and use of indigenous tools and skills are the factors that differentiate "craft" from a commodity. (Design Intervention and its execution in Crafts of India-Amita Panda )

## III. CURRENT STATE OF THE CRAFT INDUSTRY

Today, an argument, an attitude faces crafts and artisans in India. This is the argument of economics, of sustainability, of marketability, which is the argument of financial survival (Crafts Council of India- April 2011)

One question is still unsolved is and unanswered. What is the state of Craft & craftsmen in India? This question carries a huge and thick question mark at its end.

India, no doubt is a very big country. It is big also because of its diversity and racial character. More than 3000 castes, 432 tribal communities, believers of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikh, Jain, Buddhism and Zoroastrian have been living together since centuries. Over 1650 dialects are spoken by the people of India. The harmony among the people of India is worth mentioning.

The planners and policy makers of India have been addressing many problems and concerns of this country. They are also addressing the need of the craftsmen and their craftsmanship but probably the issue is so vast and complicated that the issue has not been touched in complete form.( Gandhi National Centre for the Arts- Under UNESCO's Programme on Cultural Industries and Copyright Policies and Partnerships)

***“An estimated 71% of artisans work as family units and 76% attribute their profession to the fact that they have learnt family skills.”Fab India***

While crafts received royal and aristocratic patronage during pre-Independence days and played a central role in Gandhi's independence struggle, they have slowly lost relevance with the advent of industrialization.

Currently, the sector carries the stigma of inferiority and backwardness, and is viewed as decorative, peripheral and elitist. This is compounded by the Government's treatment of crafts as a sunset industry, which has resulted in a lack of well-developed policies and programs to protect and strengthen the ecosystem for artisans.

Traditional crafts have largely been marginalized by mass produced consumer goods, which tend to be cheaper due to the economies of scale associated with mechanization.

The nature of the crafts sector and challenges faced by artisans reduces their ability to compete with machine-made products .Catering to the mainstream market often necessitates a decline in quality and /or workmanship, leading to the eventual loss of skills over a few generations.

#### IV. FACTORS AFFECTING THE DYING OF CERTAIN CRAFT TRADITIONS

Artisans were traditionally an essential part of the village economy, producing everyday utilitarian objects catered towards local markets, using designs and motifs that were of significance to their communities.

However, with the advent of industrialization and increasing urbanization of markets for crafts, the historical artisan-consumer relationship has broken down, and largely been replaced by traders. This has rendered artisans' knowledge and skill, acquired over generations, virtually useless and made crafts an unsustainable source of livelihood. (Crafting a Livelihood-Building sustainability for Indian Artisans-William Bissel, Managing Director, Fabindia )

Also the marketplace isn't what it used to be. In the recent past, globalization has brought great changes across the world. The key characteristic of today's global market is the speed with which the demand for a product and change in its style, design, and colour, offer greater opportunities as well as threats to producers.

The precarious nature of handmade craft markets invites strategic approaches to reach global consumers. But, delayed response can push these deep-rooted traditional handmade products out, replacing them with mass, factory-made, machine crafts. (Vanaja Menon Vadakepat, Faisal Al Khateeb- 2012)

#### V. ROOTS OF INDIAN DESIGN

India's oral culture and its intense religious mysticism might give one the idea that there is an absence of rational thinking and scientific systems, but this is far from the truth.

Historically, it is evident from the Mohenjo-Daro-Harappa excavations that, as early as 2500 BC, there was highly developed architecture, town planning, and technology in many places. India's traditional knowledge was highly organized and meticulously articulated. Even in the arts, there were extremely detailed canons and highly sophisticated structured treatises.

Arts and crafts have always been an integral part of India's rich tradition and heritage. They are in fact the cultural symbols of the nation. These art forms are unique and demand a high adroitness. The artisans are trained in the art forms by their ancestors over generations.

Indian art forms are well popular all over the globe since the wake of ancient civilization. The artisans have transformed all the art forms from mere passion to a real economic activity over the past few decades unconsciously by acquiring basic business acumen. ( Dr.P.T. Vijayshree, B.Hema- 2011)

***“Ancient India had Shilpa Shastra for sculpture, Natya Shastra for dance, Sangeetha Ratnakara for music, Vishnu Dharmottara for art, and Vaastu Shastra for architecture.***

***Since Indian culture did not distinguish between applied art and fine art, there was no separate treatise on design”***  
(Singanapalli Balaram)

#### VI. DESIGN THINKING

Design is currently considered a cross-functional and multidisciplinary innovation activity, capable of making sense of social challenges while devising strategic and holistic solutions to support competitiveness. It is considered a fundamental ingredient in business innovation through its ability to shape ideas and translate them into practical and appealing propositions for users, while improving national performance. ( Marzia Mortati and Beatrice Villari )

#### VII. THE DESIGNER-AS-FACILITATOR

Design innovations in India's fashion products result from a fusion of modern technologies and traditional craft skills. The design process in fashion begins with research and observation. The uniqueness of a designer's creation lies in the interpretation of design sources. Sources of inspiration exist everywhere; anything visual, tactile, indeed sensual, can lead to inspiration in design.

In India the craft and design sectors share a symbiotic relationship. Through craft the designer connects with the natural world and the collective past. Traditional craft skills are adapted to contemporary design (Sanjeev Kumar and Nandini Dutta-2011)

Designers bridge the gap between the market and the artisan, as today the artisan is geographically apart from his/her client, to be able to understand his/her aesthetic and socio-cultural needs.

Designers help in finding the relevance of craft with respect to the artisan, the consumer and to the global market.

Designers are thus an interface, between the past and the present, the traditional and the modern, trying to match craft production to the needs of modern times and demands (Sethi, 2005)

Designers should be trained not only to solve problems, but what is more important they should be trained to help others solve their own problems.

One of the most valuable functions of a good designer today is to ask the right questions and of those concerned so that they become freshly involved and seek a solution themselves.( Charles and Ray Eames-“India Report )

Also the biggest question today is that has Indian design, in fifty years of the country's independence, empowered the crafts community to become “freshly involved” and “seek solutions themselves” on how to resolve this problem of designing for new markets?

Have designers asked the right questions of the crafts community to lead to such empowerment?

Perhaps it is now time to do so. “With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other.”( Poonam Bir Kasturi- 2005)

#### VIII. DESIGN INTERVENTION

Design intervention is a process that involves designing new products; redesigning existing products, with changes in shape, size, colour, surface manipulation, function and utility; exploring new markets and reviving lapsed markets; applying traditional skills to meet new opportunities and challenges; and the

introduction of new materials, new processes, new tools and technologies.

It is seen as an interface between traditional and modernity, that matches craft production to the needs of modern living.

Design interventions have a very important role in every step of the process in creation of the craft. They should focus on the identity of a craft, its social and cultural relevance to its region, and the processes and materials involved, to incorporate the interventions in the right situations, with efficient expected outcomes and reasoning's.(Design Intervention and its execution in Crafts of India- Amrita Panda)

Design interventions also assist in creating an awareness among artisans of methods, materials, tools, processes and clientele base.

In many cases the artisans of a region have lost or rather do not have a documented form of the craft. Traditional crafts are memory based, and only memory is the knowledge bank of their traditional methods and materials (Design Intervention and its execution in Crafts of India- Amrita Panda)

### **REVIVAL OF DYING CRAFTS**

We're living in a new golden era of good design, and collaboration between designers & craftspeople is largely the reason to be thankful for.

As consumers, we're more aware of materials now – not just their visual and sensual appeal, but also where they come from, why they matter. We're more curious about how things are made and who made them (The Craft of Design- Joyce Lovelace-2013)

Collaborative innovation between designer and craftsperson is a means of expanding the craft vocabulary and tapping contemporary markets. It is also argued that a link between the apparently conflicting tenets of sustainability can be achieved through responsible and strategic design innovation which integrates the social, economic, ecological and cultural aspects. ( Rebecca Reubens 2010)

It has now been recognized that indigenous innovations are crucial for any developing nation in order to achieve cumulative growth, both economically and socially.

These innovations, as they will be mostly in the form of appropriate modifications in the existing products, will require further critical interventions and hand-holding efforts for their transition into markets.

Design intervention can help bring in the much needed empathetic understanding and holistic vision to connect and integrate the various efforts towards a positive outcome. One would come across amazing indigenous innovations in India that can be developed into marketable products and thereby help in creating business success. These could provide vital directions for a country like India, to transform into an innovation-driven economy. ( Ascertaining the Scope for Design Interventions for their Successful Commercialization- Ravi Mokashi-Puneekar, Shashank Mehta- 2011)

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