

Sustainability of the Handcrafted

Smriti Zubin Irani



Rigorous efforts, therefore need to be made to provide children of artisans with education, training, access to the market and with wages for a dignified livelihood to enable them to continue their family and community craft traditions which have given India a unique place in the world of handcrafted products since time immemorial

The Indian handicraft and handloom industry forms an integral part of the rich cultural heritage of the country. It is an unorganized, decentralized, labour intensive cottage industry which provides employment to craftspersons in rural and semi urban areas and generates substantial foreign exchange for the country, while preserving the rich and unique cultural heritage of India.

Agricultural and pastoral communities have traditionally depended on their skills in weaving and handicrafts as a secondary source of income. It is estimated that there are around 23 million people engaged in handicrafts and weaving today. As a socio-economic group, they are at the bottom of the pyramid. The tangible contribution by the sector is evident in significant export earnings. Indian handicrafts are exported across geographies, with major destinations being developed markets such as US, the UK, the UAE, Germany, France, Latin American countries (LAC), Italy, the Netherlands, Canada and Australia. On a cultural plane, they are the conveyers of India's rich and ancient traditions in craftsmanship and epitomize the beauty of the handcrafted.

The strengths of the sector are those of availability of abundant and cheap labour, use of local resources,

low capital investment and unique craftsmanship which have received global appreciation. Despite these strengths, the sector faces various challenges such as low literacy and education levels, poor exposure to modern technological skills, lack of adequate finance to invest in raw material and poor institutional framework. At a macro-level, there is competition from mechanized goods: handlooms face a constant threat from powerloom and synthetic fabrics. Today, glass and melamine have made the environmentally friendly, unglazed earthenware *kulhar* or *shikora*, almost obsolete.

In spite of these constraints, it is estimated that the sector has witnessed some growth annually.

Investing in the crafts sector offers tremendous opportunity to improve the economic, environmental and social conditions of rural communities. The global market for crafts is projected to reach around USD 700 billion by 2019; India's present share is below 2 per cent, representing a significant growth opportunity. There are environment benefits too. Production processes used in crafts have a low carbon footprint and promote the use of locally available materials as well as natural and organic materials where possible. Crafts production represents an opportunity to provide a source of earning and employment for otherwise low-skilled, home-based women, improving their status within the household and community.

The author is Cabinet Minister, Ministry of Textiles, Government of India.



Organised Textile Sector Unit

Harnessing the potential of this sector requires different types of investments to preserve traditional crafts, strengthen the sector, and improve the incomes of artisans.

The artisan has to be hand-held through a fragmented value chain. Artisans engaged in production need to be reminded and made aware about the value of their skill and continuously trained to upgrade their skills and product offerings. The Weavers' Service Centers (WSC) of the Office of DC Handlooms under the Ministry of Textiles, play a pivotal role in skill-up-gradation, capacity building and disseminating technological interventions to handloom weavers for better productivity, thereby improving earnings of weavers. They provide design inputs to weavers, arrange training programmes in pre-weaving, weaving and post-weaving disciplines such as winding, warping, sizing, dyeing, dobby jacquard pneumatic weaving, design making (CAD), etc. WSCs also sponsor weavers to various trade fairs and expositions to help them in establishing direct market linkages.

The Mega Handloom Clusters Scheme has been actively engaged in developing clearly identifiable geographical locations that specialize in specific products, in skill up-gradation, imparting design inputs, improving infrastructure facilities and health facilities to meet discerning and changing market demands both at domestic and at the international level

and to raise the living standards of the millions of weavers engaged in the handloom industry.

On the occasion of National Handloom Day this year (7 August), an MoU was signed between the Ministry of Textiles and

the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship to promote skill development and entrepreneurship in the handloom industry. As per the agreement, the two Ministries will jointly undertake various skill development and entrepreneurship development programmes for handloom weavers through knowledge sharing, resource optimization and synergy of institutions.

Secondly, crafts have to be contemporized and made relevant to urban lifestyles; branding efforts need to be strengthened to enable Indian crafts to compete in global markets, and new business models need to be developed that blend social and commercial goals. *India Handloom Brand* is an important initiative in the marketing and branding context. It was launched by the Hon'ble Prime

Minister of India on the occasion of the first National Handloom Day on August 7, 2015. It is an initiative for branding high quality handloom products with zero defects and zero effect on the environment by endorsing their quality in terms of raw materials, processing, embellishments, weaving design and other quality parameters and by ensuring social and environmental compliances in their production.

Another concern is the lack of professional guidance that is available to artisans in product design to cater to swift changes in consumer tastes and preferences. As part of attempts to address this concern, the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) has integrated the 'Craft Cluster Initiative' into its curricula that allows students to work in collaboration with the artisans and weavers from different geographical areas of the country. This helps in exposing the students to the challenges faced by the sector and in introducing new designs, techniques and materials for the benefit of weavers and artisan community. It also exposes the weavers and artisans to the challenges of the modern marketplace. NIFT Chennai has been working with the Kozhikode cluster in Kerala (Vadakara, Koilandy and Kozhikode) which deals predominantly with two age-old crafts of the region, viz., handloom weaving and *Uru*. The handloom sector covers around 30 working cooperative societies and Beypore in the handicrafts sector has artisans engaged in making wooden



Dastkari Handicraft



Employment for Women

models of traditional boats known as *Uru*.

The quality of work and better wages can be sustained and improved if artisans can be enabled to cater to a regular market duly supported with easy availability of quality raw materials at affordable prices. The absence of direct marketing outlets and difficult access to urban areas persist as challenges to the average artisan today. The market linkages of the artisan and the cluster has to be strengthened and technology can be leveraged for the purpose.

Promotion of marketing of handloom products through e-commerce is therefore one of the priorities of the Ministry of Textiles. In order to promote e-marketing of handloom products in a transparent, competitive and effective manner, different e-commerce platforms have been engaged for marketing of handloom products. By building such a marketplace, the artisan can be empowered to earn a decent livelihood.

The crafts sector can benefit through a multi-stakeholder approach by increased participation by different stakeholders such as government, financial institutions, non-profit organisations and academia in their areas of specialization. Building a collaborative ecosystem will align the roles of different stakeholders, each of

whom can support artisans in different ways. An interesting example is that of the Aqua Weaves of North Eastern Development Finance Corporation, an Assam-based organisation which has turned to the perennial and polluting water hyacinth to come up with a range of interesting products like bags, home décor and utility products. Following Thailand and Malaysia and with design inputs and expert advice from the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, the products have evolved and are understood to command a market not only within the country, but also overseas including in Nepal and Japan. This has benefited the artisans engaged in this activity.

The handlooms and handicrafts of India are hugely diversified. Different regions of India are famous for the production of different types of handcrafted products which have been developed on the basis of the geographical location, climatic condition and the ancient culture of these areas.



Using Modern Techniques

It is heartening that Geographical Indications (GI) have been registered for as many as 143 fabrics and handicraft products. GI's in textiles include the famed *Chanderi* from the heartland of India, a woven fabric that traces its origin to around 1305 AD. Similarly, there is a GI for *Kota Doria*, the name given to sarees woven at Kaithoon and in many villages located in the Baran district of Rajasthan mainly made of cotton and silk yarns in different combinations in warp as well as weft.

Other unique and treasured fabrics of India made by skilled weavers over the centuries and accorded GI status include the famed *Pochampali ikat*, *Kanjeevaram silk*, *Srikalahasthi Kalamkari*, *Maheshwar*, the *Kantha* (an indigenous household craft of the women of West Bengal), the *Jamdani*, a vividly patterned sheer cotton fabric, the *Baluchari* and the famed *Orissa Ikat* to name a few amongst many others.

The GI protects the traditional knowledge of the communities of weavers and artisans and affords legal protection against unauthorized usage; it assigns a collective monopoly to the artisans thereby protecting the unique cultural heritage of our traditional arts and crafts.

In an increasingly mechanized, homogenized world, ensuring the sustainability of skills, techniques and the traditional knowledge behind India's myriad handicrafts and handlooms is a major challenge. Rural youth are increasingly disenchanted with family craft traditions, being exposed to the struggle to find markets and fair prices. People need to be sensitised about the importance of our crafts. Rigorous efforts, therefore need to be made to provide children of artisans with education, training, access to the market and with wages for a dignified livelihood to enable them to continue their family and community craft traditions which have given India a unique place in the world of handcrafted products since time immemorial. ■

(E-mail: mot_fb@nic.in,
minister.textile@gov.in)