13 An assay of the Indian Craft Communities - an integral part of the Indian Fashion Industry

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Abstract
The contribution of the artisan to the fashion landscape of the country can hardly be overlooked. Imagine a 'modern' India sans crafts.

This paper based on the study of the Indian Crafts Industry is, also, in part, an assay of the Indian crafts community from a social constructionist perspective, attempting to document and analyse the knowledge exchange within and beyond these communities. The study seeks to identify and illustrate the peripheral factors and issues which affect that knowledge transfer, aiming to synchronise with the processes and requirements of the present.

It is exigent to understand the community structures, the outlook and the perception of crafts by the craftspeople themselves, for an effective comprehension of the knowledge exchange within the craft communities. To keep the knowledge wheel turning, the study finds an insistent need to encourage interaction and collaboration among the craft communities and various interest groups employing different means and media to do the same.

The idea draws from Wenger's (2007) concept of 'Communities of Practice' – bringing together groups that share similar interests to join forces and facilitate each other's needs. Craftspeople of different regions can likely find something of mutual interest, and sharing of knowledge will lead to the emergence of new ideas. The challenge is capacity building and enabling small-scale producers to use the information they access effectively.

Towards this end, a comprehensive and efficacious amalgamation of a more contemporary approach is required, employing the latest that technology has to offer. Mapping the 'invisible' knowledge exchange networks of the craft communities reveals the top-down structure of the crafts industry; which incidentally, is also largely the result of the widespread illiteracy. Replacing the top-down structure with a bottom-up one will provide a more proactive role for the craft communities, thereby also the impetus for a much needed change in their social status.

The interpretive community of crafts

Marx framed craftsmanship in the broadest possible terms as 'form-giving activity,' emphasising that self and social relations develop through the making of physical things, enabling the all-around development of the individual (in Sennett, 2009). Sennett adds that craftsmanship is 'an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake. The craftsman explores these dimensions of skill, commitment and judgement by focusing on the intimate connection between hand and head' (Sennett 2009:9).

Donkin (2001) goes further to add that craft occupies a middle ground between art and mechanised manufacture, though the boundaries between them are permeable. To her, craft is not just about making things – it is about cultural identity; therefore she acknowledges the structure, values, history and identity of the communities in which crafts are practiced. It is the function of the end product that creates the difference between art and manufacturing. However, over a long term, crafts may achieve an artistic status later in their life. Donkin describes three characteristics of crafts: crafts resulting from a certain type of making; objects created by hand through the skilled use of tools; and essentially functional objects (Donkin, 2001). Additionally, Risatti observes that 'while purpose and function instigate the making of craft objects, form, material, and technique are the elements necessary to bring them into being as physical, tangible things' (Risatti, 2007:80). Moreover, these physical elements have a universality that affects the way they come together to form the craft object.

Crafts in the Indian context

The largest democracy in the world, India also boasts multiple cultural origins. Indian crafts which have evolved amidst this diversity are mostly community-based, tradition-driven, and purchased for cultural or utilitarian reasons by a largely domestic market. It is a part of everyday life. Jaitly (2007) points out that the word 'handicrafts' came to describe ornamental, decorative objects that may be utilitarian, but actually served the upper echelons of Indian society, whereas common potters, weavers and others who made non-artistic crafts were categorised as mere village industry. Jaitly argues that crafts make the 'wheels of the economy' turn, thus meriting serious attention instead of condescending patronage, over-romanticised projection, or apologetic 'discount' support (Jaitly 2005).

Traditional arts or crafts were created as a communication between maker and user. They have a very indigenous face and roots - addressing the needs and reflecting the peculiarities of the society they belong to, which is why they received state patronage by kings and monarchs who supported and sustained artisans and their crafts. The artisans put their creativity and imagination to cater to the needs of their respective society. With increased promotion of machine-made foreign products in the Indian market by British authorities during their rule over India, the artisans lost their hold over the patron-client network, and their access today is through the middlemen (Jena, 2010).

According to Joneward (2017), after 40 years of planned development, government planners and policy-makers remain conceptually confused about the role of the craft sector in India. Some stress the importance of keeping the cultural heritage alive, while others emphasize the employment generation potential of the sector. As a consequence, artisans have been viewed as part of the welfare sector, propped up by subsidies and grants, rather than as part of the core economic sector.

This research, and other recent research, however, also indicates that the key issue faced by the crafts sector in modern India is the disenchantment and the consequent migration of the new generation from the traditional crafts. As Tyabji (2007) says, craft is a profession that neither gives adequate economic returns nor social status. While craft traditions are a unique mechanism for rural artisans entering the economic mainstream for the first time, they also carry the stigma of inferiority and backwardness; craftspeople are seen as picturesque exhibits of our past, rather than dynamic entrepreneurs of our present and future. All this has led to increased migration of craftspeople from crafts. Skilled workers in remote locations are faced with a hand-to-mouth existence, and have no choice but to leave their traditional work. For the gen-next coming from the family of traditional craftspeople, the respective 'crafts' are already dead, or dying a fast one. Such disillusionment certainly does not bode well for the sector. Bhatt (2007), however, argues that crafts can counter this techno-aesthetic dominance, for they inherently represent material and environment. Also, having an incredibly rich heritage the crafts sector has the potential to unleash the power of the Indian fashion industry too.

As Chatterjee (2015) says the need of the hour is positioning of India's craft traditions as addressing the most urgent challenges of sustainable development and of offering a confident identity that defines globalisation in its own terms.

The quest

The goals before us are, therefore, very clear – to identify and address the current state of affairs within the crafts sector. This study examines the current state of the craft sector in India, exploring the various factors influencing the sector and how they impact artisans and craft workers; and further relates these to the individual craft communities studied.

This research begins with the objective to gain an understanding of the ways in which knowledge has been transferred in craft communities in India, through mapping of the structure of craft communities and external bodies, between which knowledge exchange takes place, and forthwith identify and understand some underlying problem areas. The focus areas for this research have been the different craft communities in the Kutch region of Gujarat and various craft communities in Himachal Pradesh, along with various interest groups like Craft Development Organisations (CDOs) and craft activists.

The analysis of the knowledge exchange networks reveal the top-down structure of the crafts industry. While it is proposed to keep the knowledge wheel turning, it seems time to re-look at the present 'top-down structure'. Also an insistent need has been felt to encourage dialogue about crafts among the young, and in various interest groups including the craftspersons themselves.

The study: theoretical framework and methodology

'Our experience of the world arises from multiple, socially constructed realities' (Gibbs 2010:7).

This research was grounded in a social constructionist framework, and utilised an interpretivist approach to data analysis. A ‘cross-sectional study’ was undertaken in two states of the country, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. This involved studying multiple case studies to explore relationships within each setting, and across settings (Baxter 2008). Three craft communities in the Kutch region of Gujarat and five communities in Kullu and Kangra regions of Himachal Pradesh, along with various craft development organisations were studied. This enabled both horizontal (comparison) and vertical (in depth) analysis of how the communities are structured, and how that structure affects the knowledge exchange networks in each. The studies employed ethnographic methods, including interviews and non-participant observation, to understand and document the perceptions, feelings, ideas and thoughts of the participants.

The analysis of the case studies of craft communities leads directly into a mapping of the knowledge exchange networks in each community, including the relationships between each player and the influential factors. This was further followed by a cross-case analysis looking for patterns, themes and relationships (Patton, 2002). The theory of ‘communities of practice’ proposed by Wenger (2007) is then used as an additional interpretative lens to analyse the data which introduces learning as a process of social participation. After an interpretive account of the interviews and field observations, the networks are generated using network theory. Drawing from ‘graph theory’ in network analysis, as explained by Streeter and Gillespie (1992), the networks are presented as sociograms, which display the relations among network members in a two-dimensional space. The relationships and links are then taken into consideration to develop a more holistic picture of the knowledge exchange that takes place in craft communities generally. These are then analysed holistically, to understand in totality the whole system of the Indian crafts industry.

Below is presented an example of the Knowledge Exchange Networks (sociograms) along with the analysis which was generated for each of the communities:

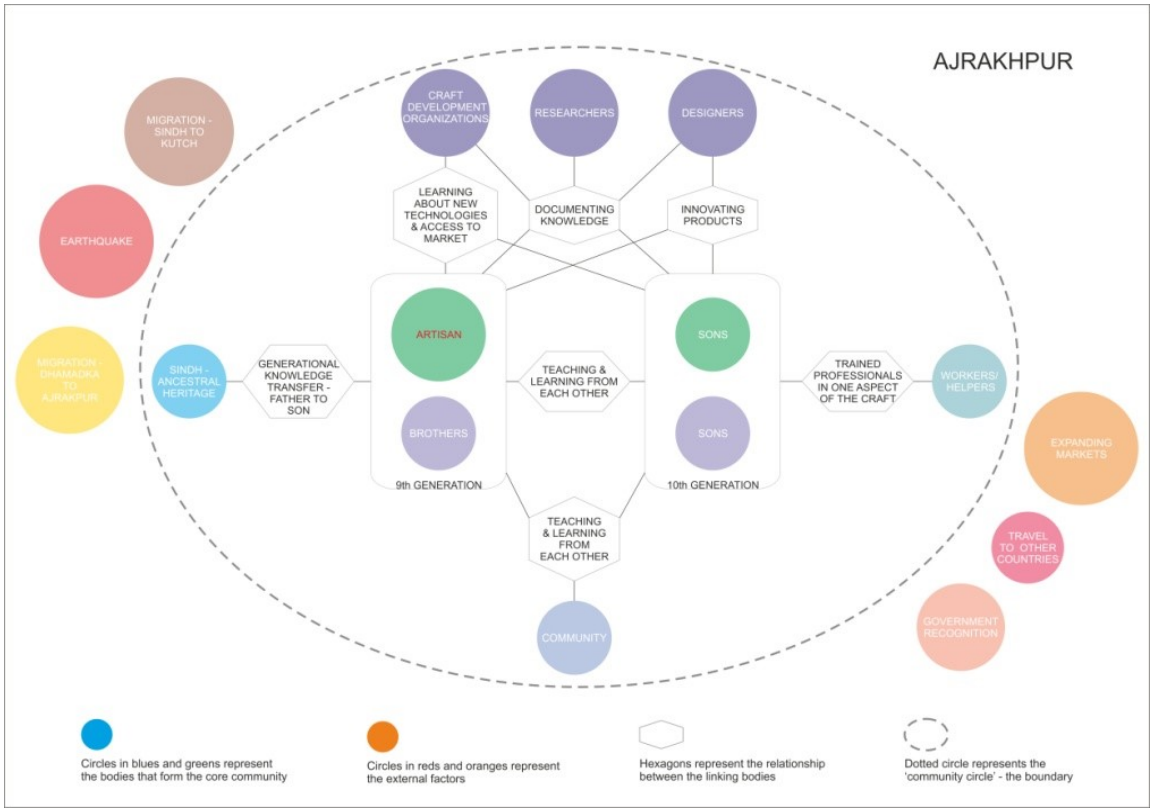

Fig.1 The Ajrakhpur Masters

The Knowledge Exchange Network:
Dr. Ismail Mohammad Khatri from Ajrakhpur, is a well-known craftsman and a national award winner. He also holds a doctorate degree given to him by De Montfort University in the UK, for his expertise. The Khatris, Ismail bhai and his two brothers are the ninth generation of the family practising Ajrakh printing. They experimented with chemical dyes, but Ismail bhai's father, realising the hazardous effects on both people and environment, reverted back to using natural dyes, and thus played a role in reviving the traditional process of printing.

Ismail is also a Craftmark member, which facilitates his business. Apart from the sons and nephews who work with him, he employs a few other helping hands. His craft derives its body and soul from nature; craftsmen work in unison with their environment where all the elements of nature – the river, mud, trees, sun and even the animals – play a part in the making.

Analysis:
The analysis of the data collected primarily through open-ended interviews and non-participant observation directed the mapping of knowledge flows and the media and mechanisms for exchange. Applying Wenger's theory of 'communities of practice', learning was understood as a process of social participation. Integrating this with the social constructivist lens gave clarity and a holistic dimension to the analysis of the knowledge exchanges that take place in the craft community. As in Fig. 1, since Dr Ismail Khatri and

his family are important players in the way the community works, they have been placed at the centre of the network, with the various bodies they interact with linked around them. The two current generations are placed in the centre, showing how basic craft skills are transferred between father and son; there is a continuous exchange of knowledge that takes place between them. Both learn from and teach each other, and share their knowledge either verbally or through demonstrations. Their craft knowledge is now tacit, having been exposed to the family profession from childhood. Their community shares the knowledge of block printing with them, and this exchange too happens both ways. The family employs a few printers, dyers and weavers to help them with the production process who are either part of the community or from outside. These 'helpers' hired for their expertise are skilled professionals; although they might also be taught specific skills as required by the employers. The role of craft development organisations, designers and researchers in this network is essentially to assist this family and community, and make them economically sustainable. These external players become the means through which the craft community gets access to new technologies and new markets. The interventions also take the form of design innovations that involve an understanding of the new markets.

The study also looked at the CDOs: HIMBUNKAR, Kala Raksha, and Dastkar that are making attempts to 'rescue' and 'restore' the significance of crafts. 1. The Himachal Pradesh State Handloom & Handicrafts Development Cooperative Federation Ltd. known as "HIMBUNKAR", a state level organisation of primary cooperative societies consisting of weavers and artisans providing training technical knowhow, raw material and avenues for marketing to its artisans members. 2. Artisan initiative and participation continue to be the pillars of Kala Raksha's work, a craft development organisation based in Gujarat. Artisan Design Committees create exquisite contemporary work based in their traditions. They focus on the holistic development of the artisans. In 2005, their education initiative blossomed into Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, the first institution of design for traditional artisans, and in 2010, they launched the trademark Artisan Design. 3. Dastkar, based in Delhi, assists craftspeople through support service activities such as capacity building workshops, skills training, collaborative design innovation and product development; helping them transform traditional skills into products that have contemporary appeal, thereby providing craft communities with a source of permanent employment and sustained earning.

Agents of change and evolution in the Indian crafts industry

Interestingly, common patterns were seen across the analysis of all the craft communities and CDOs under study. These are discussed below:

Industrialisation and Globalisation

Jaitly (2005) believes that 'crafts can be termed as a decentralized creative industry where the human mind and hand is more important than the small machines and tools they may use.' Donkin observes that the push towards modernisation and mechanisation has crippled some sectors of the craft industry. For instance, it has been well documented that the increase in power-loom products had a negative impact on the livelihoods of weavers (Donkin, 2011). Imitation of handmade products by machine has generally adversely impacted craft industries. Jaitly (2005) points out that in China, mechanisation is efficiently organised to imitate the hand work of India, in order to encroach upon the markets for India's special skills. On the growth in world tourism during the globalisation phase, Jena (2010) notes that the growth in the handicrafts sector, has increased demand for ethnic and culture-

specific goods, leading to an increasing global reaction to the homogenisation of mass-produced goods.

Design Interventions

When the relationships between maker and user broke down, design emerged as a separate entity indicating a separation between concept and execution. Government, in collaboration with design schools, has introduced training programmes for craft communities, and the designer has emerged as a bridge between the artisan – who is no longer attuned to the requirements of the client – and the market. As Sethi (2005) elaborates, the assumption is that the artisan can no longer be a designer, producer and marketer rolled into one; the 'designer' has now become an interface between tradition and modernity, matching crafts to modern living. On the contrary, some, such as, Frater, feel the need to supplement the artisan's creativity and production-power, instead of training them to do something that is inherent to them. Thus there is a debate about the need for these 'design interventions'. Donkin (2001) suggests interventions and development programmes that can extend education and training to young people, which is required to maintain and restore crafts heritage. However, as Frater argues that "In craft, what is usually called design intervention, indicates a separation between concept and execution. In the process, the concept retains its value, while the execution becomes labour" (Frater, 2011). The crafts people today appear to have lost faith in their ability to innovate and have become dependent on the workshops and interventions. They expect blueprints to create - embroidery patterns to be printed and given to them to recreate. They no longer innovate and are thus no longer part of the decision-making process to change, to evolve.

Lack of infrastructure and low economic and social status of crafts

The infrastructures required to support and sustain the massive numbers of crafts-people is insufficient, with lack of formal education or financial support among craftspeople. Another concern is the low social status associated with crafts.

All this has led to increased migration of craftspeople from crafts. The census report shows a 33% decline in the number of weavers in the handloom sectors since 1995. Skilled workers in remote locations are faced with a hand-to-mouth existence, and have no choice but to leave their traditional work.

Analysis and emergence of themes

Ancestral Heritage

'Crafts and crafts knowledge are living links to the past and a means of preserving cultural meaning into the future' – Liebl and Roy (2000:2).

As seen in the case studies, Indian handicrafts are passed down a long line of inheritance through the transfer of tacit knowledge as part of ancestral heritage. The current generation of craftspeople are practising the craft today because it 'has been in the family.' Artisans are exposed to the craft and craft knowledge since childhood. They 'see and learn' first, and later 'learn by making'. The more they make, the more they learn, and the more they internalise the process of making.

In India, most crafts are regional and caste-based - this could be seen in the case studies. The craftspeople have strong and long associations with the crafts they practice, and in each

case the craft has become synonymous with the community it is practiced in. But there is also an amount of heterogeneity in each, as these communities employ workers from outside who may not be of the same caste and religion; this does not affect the association between communities with the craft. The major limiting factors can be listed as the ‘gender roles’ and the ‘social status’. This distinction is linked to both societal and religious beliefs that women are to remain in the house while men are the bread-winners. The link of crafts to caste is seen most in the crafts communities at the lower end of the social scale. This further acts as a de-motivator for the younger generation.

Recognition and awareness
In a few of the case studies, the craftspeople had won awards and were living examples of how recognition of the craft created awareness, making it more attractive to the outside world, and more importantly, for the younger generation of craftspeople to remain in the craft and understand that the profession is worthwhile. Recognition and appreciation build confidence, and once craftspeople have confidence in what they are doing, they will be less likely to shift to being casual labourers.

There has been a degree of interest in the welfare of the crafts and craft communities by craft development organisations, designers, and the government. The government tries to intervene and assist but the approach mostly lacks the real need of the craftspeople. For example, the government collaborates with various fashion and design schools for training and cluster development programmes; these simply make the artisans dependent upon these schemes and institutions by focusing on ‘training’ rather than ‘enhancing knowledge.’

According to Kumar (2006), the diverse nature of the artisan sector results in contradicting and working at cross-purposes. Some actors focus on the product, while some stress the sociological or anthropological aspects of the product and the practice, and others focus on markets. There is a need, however, for a comprehensive approach. The current trend is that innovations are coming from within craft communities - they are the people who carry the seeds of the particular identity as they know best how it should be translated, transformed and what shape should be given to it. But artisans recognise that innovation driven by commercialisation is different, and many are concerned that the essential identity of their art is endangered. A key question emerges: how much a craft needs to change to be accepted in the new market before it loses its cultural identity?

The media – TV, social networks, websites, newspapers and magazines – play a large role in creating awareness and recognition of crafts, particularly in opening new markets. It follows as a corollary that to ensure commercial success, craftspeople should to a certain extent understand and exploit media.

Sustainability
Chatterjee (2006) points out that crafts suffer from the charity syndrome: ’This is what we make. Please buy it,’ and not the confidence of ’This is what we know you need. Buy it!’ This is because, in India, as Liebl and Roy (2007) point out, skills and the knowledge systems remain largely informal, poorly protected, inadequately documented, socially and culturally disadvantaged, and imperfectly adaptive. Though handicrafts constitute a significant segment of the decentralised sector of its economy and employ millions of artisans, most rural industries have a limited capacity to generate even subsistence income, and a vast

majority suffers from poverty, lack of access to social services, illiteracy, exploitation by middlemen, and extremely low social status (Liebl and Roy, 2007).

Jaitly (2007) points out that in the past 100 years, wherever industrial goods have competed with local crafts, the latter have died out and craftspeople turned to other occupations. Many craftspeople want to remain in their profession, but access to funds and loans, raw materials, and development initiatives are limited because, despite being highly skilled, craftspeople are poorly educated or illiterate and come from caste groups of low status. This opens the door for middlemen to exploit the sector, in the form of loans with high interest rates, or by simply limiting their direct access to markets, thus increasing craftspeople's dependency on them. Lack of education, and of mere literacy, comes out as a major drawback limiting their prospects. Initiatives using new technologies to connect artisan with client need to be explored, taking into account the low education level of the craftspeople and their limited access to and understanding of the technologies.

Industrialisation has exposed crafts to exploitation of a different kind. The growth of Chinese manufacturers in particular has taken up a huge share of the market for handmade products. Initiatives to certify the authenticity of crafts are therefore being undertaken by, for example, trademarking them. Craftmark is an initiative by the All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association (AIACA), certifying authentic, handmade Indian products. Liebl and Roy (2007) go further, insisting on development and implementation of appropriate intellectual property legislation.

The way Forward

To cater to new markets, crafts need constant innovation to adapt traditional skills to new products for changing markets. Design interventions in terms of latest trends, technical know-how and contemporary fashion needs have, no doubt, helped the crafts and craftspeople gain a foothold in the Indian Fashion Industry. Crafts have become the USP of Indian designers (Gupta, 2012). However, as Jogenward (2017) says, the craft industry needs a more inclusive and holistic framework, which has the potential to support the dignity and autonomy of artisans, the continuity of indigenous knowledge, and the sustainability of local economies and communities. The following is, therefore, suggested to this end:

Artisan Forum

The idea of an artisan forum stems from the lack of interactions between craft communities. Knowledge is guarded, and with little or no sharing with people of similar interests, will eventually die out. Although craftspeople have fairly logical reasons for not sharing their knowledge – craft being their sole source of income being the primary one – the fact is that we are all living in a global economy, and need to change with the times. Every community comes up with its own ways of fulfilling needs. As a result, today we have different crafts in different regions, serving similar purposes. It follows therefore, that craftspeople of different regions can likely find something of mutual interest, and sharing of knowledge will lead to the emergence of new ideas. This idea draws from Wenger's (2007) concept of communities of practice – bringing together groups that share similar interests to join forces and facilitate each other's needs. As already mentioned, most of the crafts are community based, we just need to get these 'communities of practice' formed so that the crafts communities begin interacting with each other, finding areas of mutual interest, and thus innovation begins from the roots. This will strengthen the craftspeople, build their confidence and we will get to

witness true innovation. However, the suggested bottom up structure is a systemic shift that will necessitate addressing issues like lack of education and literacy. This will require the support of the communities, the craft development organisations, the design institutes and the government; not in terms of dictating but in terms of empowering the craftspeople, by providing them with basic education, resources, technical knowhow and keeping them abreast with the upcoming trends. This might even shift the status quo and bring a change in the social structure. As Bhasin (2017) suggests maybe we need to evaluate the full potential of the old 'khaki' generation slogan – 'Be Indian, Buy Indian', and emphasises the need to unlock the full potential of the export market through marketing initiatives like Handmade with Pride in India.

One such initiative has, in fact, been tested in Kutch, as part of the Disaster Management and Emergency Relief Operations after the January, 2001 earthquake. One of the initiatives of CARE India and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in collaboration with NIFT Delhi, was to get the potters in Anjar (Kutch) to meet the potters in Uttam Nagar (Delhi). The Anjar potters, who were using open pits for firing were introduced to the newer, more efficient and lower-cost technology of kilns that had helped the Uttam Nagar potters tremendously. To begin with, institutions like the National Institute of Fashion Technology, and the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design, and others could take this forward as part of their craft studies programme and hold workshops that help bring together craft communities of different regions. This initiative is an excellent example of how communities sharing similar interests can help each other. But, it is also an example of selective inclusion: this initiative helped only selective communities which were chosen based on specifics defined by the organisations. Thus, there is need for a platform where communities can interact with each other without involvement of any middlemen; they don't need the interpretive and selective lens of organisations to interact with each other.

This is where digital technology too might play a role. Today, mobile-enabled information services deliver a wide range of information to farmers and fishermen in India (Mittal et al. 2009). This approach could be applied to the crafts sector. Penetration and access to mobiles is not the challenge; the challenge is capacity building and enabling small-scale producers to use the information they access effectively. Social media is still being explored and its full potential is yet to be determined. This could also be the platform to bring the communities together. We do know that many small-scale craft groups are already featuring their products on social media platforms like Instagram. What if they had a dedicated platform to share, discuss and innovate collaboratively?

However, it needs to be noted that this kind of an initiative will bring about a systemic change and as in systems, the components and their interconnections will need to be mapped and possibilities explored. This proposal also calls for breaking away from top-down approaches, and planning with, and for the artisans. Such a forum could help artisans raise their voice and create a bottom-up structure in which planning starts from the artisan's home and workplace. Even so, further questions will arise that will need answers to keep the balance in terms of economic requirements of the craftspeople and the country. Maybe, in the process, the questions posed by Jogenward (2017) might be answered: In the context of economic and cultural globalisation, can the craft sector be reframed within the emerging paradigm of sustainable rural development to protect local livelihoods and environments? Can artisans procure a sustainable livelihood by means of their craft skills and knowledge?

According to her, the inadequacy of the modernisation paradigm to address the concerns of artisans necessitates a more congruent framework of analysis and criteria of progress to address the challenges of improving economic viability of craft communities.

The ethnocultural trends like Ethnic fusion, which is not limited to only the Indian apparel industry, but have permeated the very lifestyle of a ‘modern Indian', is now embracing craft products, and mixing it up with the brands available in the ‘mall-culture’. But, then, if social media is to be believed, the trend is not limited to India but is a global trend, a translation of the slogan: ’The Future is Handmade’. We can further attempt to shift the Indian mindset to embrace this, realising the power of the craft they had ditched earlier in the run for the race against the Silicon Valley. That is when India will understand what globalisation really means. Imagine a ‘modern’ India sans crafts.

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