

**SUGGESTIVE MEASURES TO EMPOWER
THE 'HEIRS OF HANDICRAFTS'**

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Abstract

India is a country of traditional art and amazing crafts. Most of such handicrafts are inherent in artisans and are passed by generations to generations. The artisans are the true preservers of this wealth who are blessed with intrinsic art and god gifted skills. Despite their great contribution towards heritage and economy, the quality of their life is a burning question today. These artists are the priceless "Heirs of Handicrafts" who are to be taken care of and promoted with due considerations and inspiring environment. Therefore, this paper focuses on socio-economic condition of rural handicraft artisans and suggests appropriate measures to promote, revive and preserve various handicrafts of Surenderanagar district.

Keywords: *Handicrafts, Rural Artisans, Socio-Economic Condition, Hereditary Skills, Languishing Crafts, Suggestive Promotional Measures*

India is a country with great cultural heritage and values associated with its various crafts and arts from ancient days. The growth of crafts in society was the sign of the cultivation of sensitivity and the stirring and mellowing of humanism. It stood for man's endeavour to bring elegance and grace into an otherwise harsh and drab human existence. (Chattopadhyay,1980)¹ Thus handicraft was considered as an invaluable element which inculcates sensitivity, values and aesthetic vision towards life and humanity. Handicraft fills colors in life and reflects the beauty of culture and the peculiarities of any civilizations. Therefore, the artisans who have kept this heritage alive since centuries must be saluted with respect and dignity. They are not only the producers of demanded goods but play a variety of roles associated with their work as worship. The torchbearers of India's craft traditions, inheritors of ancient technologies and cultural systems, artisans and creators living within a binding communities 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. (Jaitly, 2001)² Traditional skills of handicrafts and craftsmanship should always be thought of in its totality reflecting the harmonious coordination of body, mind and emotions of the creators. Despite such great contribution towards heritage and humanity, the socio-economic condition of such artisans and the quality of their life is a burning question today. The Handicraft sector in India is covered under the control of Ministry of Textiles. The Indian textile industry is the second largest manufacturers and exporters in the world after china. The industry is of vital importance to Indian economy and holds importance from the employment point of view as well. According to Report of the Steering Committee on Handlooms and Handicrafts constituted for the Twelfth Five Year Plan, the employment in handicraft sector has risen from 65.72 Lacs in 2005-06 to 68.86 Lacs crafts persons in 2010-11. According to the report of working group on Handicrafts for the 12th Five Year Plan, number of individuals to be employed with sector by 2016-17 was estimated to be

122.91 Lacs. According the annual report for the year 2017-18 of Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, the export of handicrafts including hand made carpets up to Nov. 2017 has been Rs. 21,201 Cr. During the year 2016-17, the export was Rs. 34,394.30 Cr.; while it was Rs. 31,038.52 Cr. in 2015-16. The data inspired the researcher to conduct a research to explore the grass root reality of a segment in rural Gujarat. Hence, Surendranagar district was selected as the field of research, as many handicraft artisans are working on a small base in this region, who are less recognized and deprived from the benefits of various promotional schemes launched from time to time by government and other bodies. Their vulnerable economic condition compels them for occupational shift willingly or unwillingly. It was found during the research that majority of the artisans covered under research study now are at saturated position and do not wish their children to continue with such occupation. Many gorgeous handicrafts and skills are languishing due to various reasons and they are not in the position to sustain for a long time though they are the unique representatives of the distinctive culture of our nation. The artisans are the true preservers of this wealth who are blessed with inherent art and god gifted skills. Hence, these artists are the priceless “Heirs of Handicrafts” who are to be taken care of and promoted with due considerations and inspiring environment.

Objective of the Research Study

The main objective of this research work is to study the socio-economic condition of rural handicraft artisans and to suggest appropriate measures to promote, revive and preserve various handicrafts of Surenderanagar district.

Research Methodology

Surendranagar district is the area of research study which is based on the data collected from 400 rural artisans engaged in eight types of handicraft categories, i.e., Weaving and Tangaliya; Patola; Stone Carving; Mud-work and Wood-work; Tie and Dye; Embroidery and Crochet-work; Bead-work and; Other Handicrafts. Along with them 40 experts such as Government officials, NGO workers, designers, handicraft experts and representatives of village/Taluka/district level institutions were also contacted and interviewed to have authenticated information in this field. The received data were processed through Excel and SPSS software.

Major Findings of the Study

Main findings of the present research study are as follows:

There are nearly 30% ‘Entrepreneurs’ and 70% ‘Workers’ involved in this research study. Among all ‘Artisans doing job-work from own place’ are 53%; ‘Artisans doing family business’ are 24%; ‘Artisans serving in handicraft unit’ are 17%; and ‘Artisans doing self-started business’ stand at nearly 6%; Average family size is 6 members and average number of handicraft artisans per family comes to 2. Literacy rate seems high, but level of education is quite low; Nearly 99% of the families use mobile phones; while 31.5% families have smart phones too. But 85% respondents have never used internet facilities till the date. Rest of the artisans use the internet for entertainment and social communication purpose through social media like Facebook and WhatsApp. Very few artisans have awareness about the commercial use of internet and E-marketing concept; The data shows that the percentage of artisans earning only Rs.1,000 or less (from handicraft activity per month per family) is 27%; 20% households earn within the range of Rs.1,001 to Rs.5,000; while 38% families earn

Rs.5,000-15,000 per month from handicrafts. Families of only 15% artisans earn more than Rs.15,000 per month from handicrafts; The average monthly income from handicraft activity is Rs.8,381. Here, the standard deviation comes to 9990.132 and Co-efficient of variation is 119.20. It means that the data are so dispersed that the standard deviation is higher than mean value. The average monthly income of 'Entrepreneurs' is Rs.16,105 and it is Rs.5,110 of 'Workers'. It is also noticeable that the per artisan handicraft income (monthly) is below Rs.5,000 in total 66.5% families; while 26.75% families earn Rs.5,000-10,000 from handicraft in a month per artisan. Only 6.75% household told that their per artisan income is more than Rs.10,000 during a month; 60% respondents do not have any other occupation besides handicrafts. In another source of employment, labour work (including agriculture labour) is at the dominant place; Majority of the artisans were inspired to enter into handicraft occupation either being their hereditary work or for utilizing leisure time/ for financial support to their family/ not having any other option. Only 3% artisans have been found inspired as a result of 'Training course or Schemes' initiated by government or non-government players; Majority of the artisans (94%) are interested in training if provided to them as handicraft promotion programme. They show their interest in the training of new designs, new products, utilization of modern tools and techniques, marketing and selling techniques so that they can learn and earn more; Majority of the artisans have learnt the particular crafts from family members, friends, relatives or neighbours. Only 11% artisans have been found benefited by some training course organized by either government or non-government efforts; Out of total 316 artisans having work experience of at least five years, 69% artisans have adopted changes in material and method of production and 98% have adopted changes in product designs & innovations. 34% artisans have responded affirmatively about accepting changes in sources of energy utilized during the production process while 35% artisans told that they had done changes in machinery, tools and equipment as compared to the practices carried out by them before 5-10 years; Majority of the artisans purchase their raw-material from wholesalers at state level according to orders received and on cash basis; 48% Entrepreneurs sell their products to traders or big units, as they don't afford to sell all the products to end users themselves. They work according to contracts or orders received from the big players of the market. In this class, Tie and Dye artisans are at the first place followed by Stone carving artisans who find their market through some agents or contractors; Only 9% artisans have experience of selling their products in exhibitions or fairs. The percentage of 'Entrepreneurs' selling their products through Government Agencies, Self Help Groups/Cooperatives and Non-Profit Organizations is merely 3.36%, 5.04% and 6.72% respectively; Majority of the entrepreneurs sell their handicraft products at local/district or state level market. Some have entered to national level market but no international player was found in this area during field work; 57% artisans face competition from the producers/sellers of machine made products; 51% artisans face competition from other artisans of their own village; 33% artisans told that the artisans practicing the same handicraft at other places are their competitors. Nearly 20% artisans told since they are operating their business from rural places at a very small or micro level, they have to face competition from big producers/ traders of handicraft items. In certain places, it was observed that many 'Entrepreneurs' have

been converted in to 'Workers' of some reputed and giant production houses of handicrafts operating at a large scale, as they were not able to sustain against such dominating players in the market; Awareness and satisfaction level of artisans towards the 'Handicraft Promotional Measures by Government' is very negligible; Only 29% artisans are associated with some of the formal organizations such as Self-Help Groups, Co-operative Societies or NGOs working in this area. Besides only 14% respondents have Artisan Identity Card either issued by Ministry of Textiles, Government of India or Office of Commissioner of Cottage and Rural Industries, Government of Gujarat; Despite the efforts from government or non-government side, 91% artisans have never participated in any kind of fairs or exhibitions organized for promoting handicrafts; Majority of the artisans don't want their children to continue with this line of employment. Similarly, their children also don't take much interest in such work.

Suggestive Measures to Empower the 'Heirs of Handicrafts': The following are the suggestions to empower the rural handicraft artisans, who are the 'Heirs of Handicrafts'. According to the views of government officials and researcher's experience and observation during the field visit, the "Free-Mentality" of people is the main hurdle for development which boosts the indolence, demotivates hard workers and makes them handicapped. Hence, there should be a strict policy and plan to monitor the implementation of policies and programmes, to evaluate the outcomes and to minimize the variances; The programmes and policies should be tailor-made and suitable to the targeted mass. It has been observed during the research work that there is an environment of distrust, misconceptions and delusions among rural artisans regarding the behavior of government/ banking institutions and execution of programmes. Hence, they seem afraid of being cheated, exploited or become victim of bribery. This mentality pulls them out to take benefits of government schemes and assistance programmes. Hence, they should be genuinely and candidly make aware of all the procedures, benefits and terms-conditions of such schemes so that their doubts can be resolved. Thus, before making artisans beneficiaries of any programme, there must be correct awareness, meaningful orientation and proper discussions about it; The policies and programmes for promoting handicrafts should be revised from time to time on the basis of 'Current Need Assessment' of this regard; As the present research study outlines that majority of the rural handicraft artisans are poor having financial crises. Therefore, the government should take immediate actions to increase accessibility of financial assistance to them; There should be proper co-ordination between programme implementing agencies and bank staff. Most of the artisans are less educated. Hence, their level of financial literacy is very low. Hence, they are uncomfortable with the procedure of documentation and other formalities. Further, they may not have adequate documents to prove their credit-worthiness. Hence, bank staff should cooperate and deal with such situation politely with patience; The artisans who are in need indeed must be shortlisted and given priority in providing financial assistance. For this procedure, economic status of people (Whether APL card holders or BPL card holders) must be revised and reconsidered so that it can portray the realistic picture; Scarcity of water, inefficient water distribution system, poor & irregular supply of electricity, worst condition of roads & deficient transportation services, non-hygienic environment due to lack of underground drainage facility are

the major infrastructural problems of rural areas of this region. It must be taken in to serious consideration in rural planning; Tourism industry can foster the growth of handicraft sector by increasing the demands. Both these initiatives together can reap advantage of modern market by going hand in hand; Artisan Identity Card provides true recognition to the artisans and makes them eligible to avail benefits of various government schemes. Thus, there is an immense need to make them aware of the benefits of having such card. Further, the status of Artisan Identity Card holders must be renewed with latest updates. There must be strict rules of assessment of handicraft activities of artisans so that it can be far better than mere paper work serving no purpose; Employment generation scheme especially for handicraft sector (like The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act - MGNREGA) should be launched by government to ensure the regularity and guarantee of work with proper planning as well as pre and post analysis; The designing institutions must be involved for a long time to train and educate youth with newer designs and innovations which are compatible in contemporary markets. Along with that the experienced and senior artisans should be employed in such training institutions so that the traditional touch and hereditary culture can sustain and propagate in new generations. Hence there may be equilibrium between two extremes- conventional practices and technological advancements. Thus, the originality and aesthetics of handicrafts can be preserved and sustained without compromising the demands of modern markets; Training programme should not be designed as mere one- time event. Instead it should focus on long term results and yield projected benefits to target group and achieve pre-determined goals. Mere imparting training is not enough, but the government should arrange for logistic support after training to set up manufacturing units and follow up. Training programmes should be designed in such a way that it improves the earning capacity of artisans and are beneficial to them for uplifting their living standard by providing regular employment; There must be proper motivational programmes and appreciation plans to make artisans feel the importance and value of their hereditary art and inherent skills. New generation should be encouraged to continue with their hereditary handicraft work by proving support, assistance and appreciation; The craftsmen should be encouraged to improve the quality and quantity of work so that they can be capable of standing firmly in the competitive market for a long time. Improved technology, modern tools/equipment and qualitative raw material with adequate quantity must be made available to artisans on the basis of the result of need assessment; Handloom artisans should be encouraged and promoted by government to adopt solar energy plant so that their labour work can be reduced and their productivity can be increased at a great extent; As the educational level is quite lower in the research area, steps should be taken to encourage artisans to have further education. For this initiative, Office of Development Commissioner (Handicraft & Handloom) can join hands with NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling) after conducting due survey on current educational scenario in this region; There should be due arrangement to sell the handicraft products at direct market minimizing the intervention of middlemen. An up-to-date database or directory of artisans with their product and contact details must be maintained and revised time to time. Such directories can be made widely distributed and circulated at hotels, tourist places, airports, railway stations, bus

stations, etc. so that domestic as well as foreign buyers come to know and can contact them directly; Handicraft products should be utilized as much as possible in government/ non- government offices, hospitals, educational institutions, corporate houses, hotels, restaurants, public places, etc. Thus, use of handicraft products should not be encouraged at government level only but at private level too; Artisans should be encouraged more and more to participate in handicraft fairs and exhibitions. The present research reveals that very small percentage of artisans in this area are aware of such events due to financial incapability, lack of information, lower base of production and many more hurdles. So, there should be neutral survey and research about it and the policy makers should consider the findings of such research in further planning. Sometimes such events become market place for those traders who have nothing to do with handicrafts. So, there should be strict and transparent criteria for selection of participants; The present study reveals that mostly all the artisans do not have much knowledge about export even though their handicrafts are famous worldwide. Hence, it shows the naked fact that “The handicraft is globalized but not the artisans..!” Hence, there should be a well-designed support system which can train and guide the artisans and facilitate them to export their product themselves; It has been observe that majority of rural women artisans engaged in Embroidery, Crochet and Bead-work are part-time artisans who have adopted handicraft as a mere time-killing activities. Talents of rural women artisans go in vain being economically poor and socially unheard. Rural women must be given due recognition and their traditional art and natural talents must be nurtured and developed in such a way that must not be confined to four walls of their houses. Hence, there is an urgent need to uplift and empower the rural women who can have own identity, value and voice in society. With this objective, there should be family motivational programmes so that the art hidden in rural women get acceptance, support and motivation from their family members; Majority of Self Help Groups or Sakhi Mandals are idle or doing only saving activity. Very few are engaged in income generating activities. Such groups should be encouraged to start handicraft activities collectively and they should be provided with selling platforms; Working enthusiastically and unitedly in co-operatives can solve many hurdles in marketing and selling the handicraft products at individual level. It has been observed that many of the rural artisans are very devoted, talented and expert in producing handicrafts but lack of marketing/selling knowledge curtails their growth and discourages their morale. Hence, there should be some agency or mechanism which can work as bridge between artisans and customers eliminating the interference of middlemen living a very small pie of cakes for actual creators. Efficiently managed cooperatives can be fruitful in this regards. But government must keep an eye on their performance and ensure decentralization of power and democracy in decision making. Such cooperatives should be given scope of participating in fair/exhibitions, opening outlets and priority purchase benefits; Artisans should be encouraged to develop own brands and advertise their products. Tangaliya artisans have received Geographic Indication (GI) Number for their product; similarly other unique handicrafts of this region must proceed further for such recognition. NGOs working in this field should facilitate such initiatives; Corporate sectors, under their CSR activities, should give priority to handicraft promotion campaign. Further, they can introduce the concept such as ‘Contract

Handicrafts' (similar to 'Contract Farming' in agricultural sector). So that the artisans need not to worry about arranging working capital and searching for markets. But due care must be taken that the artisans must get sufficient reward for their craft without being exploited; The functioning of banking sector must be reviewed, as artisans have been found hesitated about stepping in to the banks. Thus, there should be coordination between the functioning of various programme implementing agencies and banking institutions. Further, artisans should be provided with the necessary information and facilitation about banking procedures, formalities to be fulfilled, preparation of documents for availing credit benefits or anything else; Though the government is supporting rural handicraft artisans, the information about various programmes are not known to majority of the respondents covered under study. It has been realized that some of the big pockets frequently take benefits of government schemes but they do not share such information with others. Hence, the unity, cooperation and sense of brotherhood are less observed among artisan class. The supporting organizations which are responsible for implementation of government programmes should take serious steps to spread awareness among target group. Instead of arranging such awareness events at district headquarters, they should be arranged at targeted rural areas so that as many as possible can participate; E-commerce is one of the most promising channels in today's marketing scenario for selling handicrafts, as today is the age of mobile and technology. Government now encourage online marketing of handicraft products through its e-marketing links such as Central Cottage Industries Emporium (www.cottageemporium.in); Rural Bazar web store; www.craftsofgujarat.gujarat.gov.in; e-store of Garvi-Gurjari (www.estoregurjari.com); Mahila E-Haat (www.mahilaehaat-rmk.gov.in), etc. Besides, private players and NGOs also provide such online marketing platform to handicraft artisans. Awareness about such efforts should be spread widely among rural handicraft artisans along with well-planned training and practical experiences; The following cyber marketing efforts can push the growth of rural handicraft artisans.

Individual level efforts: An individual handicraft artisan can develop his/her own website or with the help of Cybermediaries, they can start e-commerce activity; Group level efforts: At village level, artisans can organize themselves in to Clusters (region-wise, craft-wise, etc.), Co-operatives or Self-Help Groups and start e-commerce activities collectively; NGO and other private institutions can help handicraft artisans to market their products online directly or through web stores like Amazon, Flipkart, Snapdeal, etc; Government level efforts: There must be an effective and efficient implementation of various programmes and schemes boosting e-commerce activities for handicraft artisans; Corporate level efforts: Under the head of Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR), companies can focus on providing e-commerce platform to rural handicraft artisans.

The public at general should be made aware and motivate to buy and use the products which are 'Handmade in India'. This awareness and consciousness should be inculcate from the childhood by introducing the subject 'Handicraft' in education system not only at primary but all the stages of education for the holistic development of the students, as it develops sense of cooperation, creative & logical thinking, concentration, will power, self-confidence, decision making power, art of expressing self, enthusiasm, discipline, honesty and devotion towards work and life.

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