

## TRIGGERING INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY IN TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS SECTORS - AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

Billions of people across the globe are working in the informal sectors possesses traditional skills and knowledge, of which a large number makes a living by producing traditional handicrafts. The informal sector in India provides opportunities of employment to more than 330 million workers. The grave problems in the crafts sector in India are lack of knowledge and access to means for enhancing quality and productivity. It has also been pointed out that areas, such as, innovation in design and form, skill development, safety, environmental awareness, technical improvement and market development need greater attention for bringing in change in the traditional handicrafts sector. Perhaps the greatest evil is the lack of awareness and education. In India, many researchers and agencies have given valuable inputs in connection with conservation and revival of traditional crafts. Touching the root and taking the course of any change process for innovation and creativity in this environment calls for a conscious and methodical intervention process. The intervention can only be successful, if the traditional craftsmen are accepting the process of change for innovation. And the urge for this change must come from within. It has been felt to intervene in the case of a section of this traditional handicrafts sector – Dhokra through a two-way intervention process, through the route of technological and HRD intervention.

### INTRODUCTION:

Millions of people who possess traditional skills and knowledge make a living by producing traditional handicrafts. In India, more than 330 million people are engaged in the informal sector, of which traditional crafts sector occupies a large chunk. Here, it is prudent to define traditional handicrafts before discussing about its innovation and creativity. The following definition of traditional handicrafts can be found in the extant literature in the Indian context:

'Items made by hand, often with the use of simple tools, and ... generally artistic and/or traditional in nature. They include objects of utility and objects of decoration' (*Definition given by the Development Commissioner of Handicrafts, Government of India, as quoted by Liebl and Roy, 2003a*).

It would also be relevant to state the definition of handicrafts or traditional craft, given by UNESCO/ITC (1997): 'Artisanal products are those produced by artisans, either completely by hand, or with the help of hand tools or even by mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component

of the finished product. The special nature of the finished products derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant.'

Notwithstanding the importance of and the role played by the traditional crafts, the crafts and the craftsmen have never been given due importance. The role played by the traditional handicrafts in the economy of any country has never been assessed and explored properly. It is needless to mention that traditional handicraft has a tremendous scope of developing the quality of the artifact through innovation, diversification, quality control and marketing.

### PROBLEMS FACED BY THE TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS SECTOR - THE NATIONAL SCENARIO:

While analyzing the micro-enterprises engaged in the appliqué work in Orissa (Jena & Mahapatra, 2009) study of its profile, problems and prospects of the workers and the strategies for sustainable

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development of the particular crafts sector, the appalling social and economic condition in which the crafts persons live in. The problems faced by the craftsmen of Uttar Pradesh are inadequate support mechanism for product development, lack of mechanism for dispersal of technology for enhancing productivity, inadequacy of raw material beside others (Development Report, Planning Commission, UP, 127-151).

All factors and experiences narrated above are not only point towards impediment of growth of the traditional crafts sectors, it also restricts innovation in products and forms and satisfaction of the craftsmen, in spite of an increasing demand in the national and international market as well. There is also a tremendous scope for expansion of the market through innovation, creativity and diversification of these traditional crafts, suited to the tastes of the modern-day customers across the world.

#### **SCOPE OF INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY IN TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS INDUSTRY - A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:**

The world-wide figure suggests that there is a US\$ 2 billion dollar market of the traditional handicrafts. And it is increasing day by day due to opening up of new markets. In India, the handicrafts export shows a steady upward trend and it is literally zooming. In 1986-87, the export figure stood at Rs,387 crore, which has become 8,343 crore in the year 2002-'03, i.e., within a span of 6 years.

Based on the extant review of literature, there is a glaring lacunae with respect to the fact that there was no such intervention or research for identifying the factors for innovation and creativity in the handicrafts, improving the condition, creating awareness in health, safety, process etc. of the traditional craftsmen through human resource development. The case is more acute with traditional crafts like dhokra and terracotta. Only one study has considered enhancement of productivity (Jha & Kumar, 2000) of the dhokra artisans of Jharkhand. There were also some isolated activities in connection with capacity building and improving the design aspects. In almost all these cases, interventions were taken in a piecemeal manner. A wholesome and sustaining approach was never undertaken by any individual or group for

identification and development of the conditions of the dhokra artisans through development of human resources and technology. Findings of the previous studies call for addressing various research questions considering dhokra artisans in a comprehensive and sustained manner.

Considering the changes at the national as well as at international level, there will be a demand for an overall change in the approach with which dhokra artisans consider their craft. With innovation and creativity in mind for the purpose of elevating their quality of life and their crafts, there is an urgent need to look into this matter entirely from a different perspective. These previous findings suggest the need for utilizing action research method as compared to one shot research conducted by researchers in the past.

In India, many researchers and agencies have given valuable inputs in connection with conservation and revival of traditional crafts. Jena (2007) suggests some measures for intervention for revival of the craft sector. This must be carefully planned. Emphasis is laid on imparting training to the artists for creating awareness, innovation of new techniques and designs, new process for meeting the demand of the variety-seeking consumers. Some researchers have put the onus for development of traditional craft on the Government to protect, promote and support these small enterprises and the traditional craft sector. However, in the globalized environment, protection in this aspect is difficult to get.

Paramparik Karigar, as part of its activities, emphasizes heavily on training and development and organizes regular training workshops during which the craftsmen are exposed to new fabrication methods, use of new materials and are made aware of the new products demanded by the market. Wood (2007) states about the concept of Dastakari Ranthambore in which the designer will bring a new approach, or a different way of seeing artisanal skill and expertise, and share his/her design capabilities and understanding of global market demands. The designer does not impose but rather 'unlocks' the potential of the existing skill by tweaking it to make it more saleable to consumers and in so doing may transform a craft that is struggling to find a market.

And this 'unlocking of potential' can only be done through some sincere intervention mechanism.

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS SECTOR THROUGH HRD INTERVENTION:**

The present study adopted the Action Research Methodology. The term action research was first used by Lewin (1946). Lewin talked about three steps of action research: unfreezing, changing and refreezing. It speaks about awareness about a change, diagnosing the situation and exploring new models and finally application of new behaviour being evaluated and if reinforcing, adopted. Simply put, action research is a participatory research and collaborative inquiry and is based upon a philosophy of community development that seeks the involvement of community members. Involvement and participation of a community, in the total process from problem identification to implementation of solutions, are the two salient features of action research, participatory research and collaborative inquiry.

Since Lewin, many researchers have been interpreted it in various ways. However, three common areas can be found in the literature. Eden and Huxham (1996) argue that the findings of action research result from 'involvement with members of an organisation over a matter which is of genuine concern to them'. Zuber-Skerritt (1996) further stress that the researcher is part of the organisation within which the research and change process are taking place. It also suggests that action research should have implications beyond the immediate project.

Marsick and Watkins (1997) inferred that action research differs from other forms of applied research due to its explicit focus on action, bringing about change within the organization. The purpose of action research and discourse is not just to describe, understand and explain the world but also to change it (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). The importance of involvement of the participants throughout the process in action research has been emphasized by Schein (1995). This is because the participants are more likely to implement the change they have helped to create. Once the participants have identified a need for change and have widely shared the need, it becomes difficult to ignore, and the pressure for change comes from within. This not

only brings change, it also ushers innovation and creativity among the artisans due to renewed enthusiasm. It is, therefore, a combination of information gathering and facilitation of change. It is also a scientific method in the form of data gathering, forming and testing hypothesis, and measuring results, although not pursued as rigorously as in the laboratory, is nevertheless an integral part of the process. Thus, the process of intervention for human resource development opens up the suppressed desire of artistic creativity and entrepreneurial innovation.

**HRD INITIATIVE UNDERTAKEN FOR THE DHOKRA CLUSTER OF DARIAPUR:**

Banking on the first hand response from the dhokra cluster of Dariapur, which had been gathered through observing, questioning, interpreting and suggesting, strategy for the action research was formulated. It was decided to implement some measures for development through awareness campaign and training, where the women folk in general and women artisans in particular will have a say. Women artisans of any cluster are considered as 'soft change agents' and Dariapur is not an exception. The success of elevating quality of life and quality of their craft through generating awareness about quality of artifact, awareness about market, basic health care, sanitation, literacy, savings etc. lie entirely on the will and determination of the artisans of Dariapur.

For getting an optimum result out of this human resource development, it was thought of identifying some artisans from the cluster as change agents. These artisans were selected based on their readiness to accept any challenge, knowledge and innovativeness about development of the artifact, zeal for excellence, orientation towards marketing and elevating quality of their life. The resource persons were briefed, so that, assistance could be made available for getting things done within a stipulated time frame and as per the laid down structure.

Training-need identification activities were taken up through systematic and thorough study of the prevailing practices and through formal and non-formal questionnaires. Areas for necessary human resource development intervention were identified



and programmes were designed for imparting these to the target groups. All these programmes were designed in consultation with the local resource persons.

**EFFECT OF HRD ON INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL INTERVENTION OF DHOKRAHANDICRAFT:**

As a part of any HRD and Technology Intervention process, involvement of the beneficiaries is mandatory in design and implementation of any constituent activity. The concerned artisans who were working as change agents should, at first, be made convinced about the necessity of the intervention. Only then, it would be possible to implement it to other artisans of the cluster. The barrier between knowing and implementing something new from the traditional can be broken only through human resources development. It had been perceived that development through this action research would be acceptable, if some new ideas, processes or approaches for making of superior quality artifacts are incorporated, which evolved out of the awareness campaigns. This makes a visible difference between the past and the present and exhibits the result of their innovation. It had been observed that improper (primitive) design of the furnace resulted in considerable wastage in energy and in turn consuming more time and the raising cost of the artifact. Therefore, artisans were encouraged to design a simple, fuel-efficient furnace with locally available cheap, raw materials which would help to minimize consumption of fuel and time. Also, utilizing a proper furnace would help to minimize casting failure (to the tune of 40%), which is a regular phenomenon for the dhokra artisans.

Through this intervention, they have become aware of the necessity of saving substantial energy through arresting heat-loss from the furnace. It is important, as almost three fourth of the total weight of the input of a dhokra artifact is the fuel being used. A fractional savings in the fuel front could save not only money but also time, and would improve a pollution-free environment. This, in turn, would help the artisan families to have a healthy life. This could have been possible only through this human resources development in a periodic manner. With the help of experts, they have indigenously developed new,

cheap but fuel-efficient furnace, made of locally available materials. Artisans were also ecstatic seeing less consumption of fuel, which is becoming dearer day by day.

It was well understood that the factors determine income of the artisans' household need to be identified. It is always expected that development of the artisan community is influenced by lowering of cost of production, enhancing quality of artifact, value-addition of the artifact through creative design and innovative practices, and duration of daily operation.

**CHANGE IN THE PROFILE OF DARIAPUR DHOKRAS THROUGH CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION:**

The dhokra artisans are practising their age-old technique of production and produce the traditional motifs and designs for their artifacts. The age-old technique practised by the artisans is unique in its own way, it has got limitations towards product development, diversification and better productivity. However, the modern customers are wanting more from them. Now-a-days, the customers are expecting innovative forms and designs, and quality artifacts beside the traditional one. There is also a marked development of demand for utilitarian products, which may be impregnated into the realms of tradition. Thus, a potential market with emphasis for creativity and innovation of the artifact exists and the dhokra craftsmen have to respond to it. Through creativity and innovation, a new and perhaps financially rewarding marketing can be explored for the craftsmen.

Through the action research intervention, the artisans were exposed about the need and convinced about their capability in making change through creative and innovative designs and practices. It was explained earlier that the problem relating to techniques in practice is one of the important factors influencing performance of the craft. Through this intervention, a marked development has been observed. The artisans are producing new designs and through improved techniques the quality of their artifacts has reasonably been changed. These developments have already cast an impression in the market, which is evident from the overall sales figure of Dariapur



craftsmen. During the course of this intervention, the sales volume (in terms of Indian rupees) has risen from Rs.3,50,000/- (in 2007-'08) to Rs.5,20,000/- (in 2009-'10). This escalation in sales volume amply speaks about creation of new markets and customers for the new artifacts, which bear the testimony of superior quality, design and workmanship.

#### CONCLUSION:

While writing conclusion of this study, perhaps the following quote from a United Nations document gets its place in this write up: "It is truly sad, whereas in Europe and North America, the view is being taken that the future must be handmade (for economic, environmental and social reasons). India is yet to articulate a craft future in a realistic, practical way that respects not just the issue of cultural identity but equally the force of Indian craft in the economy." It is imperative to mention that continuity of any craft is embedded in the process of change. And traditional handicrafts sector like dhokra is not an exception. The problem for development of any traditional handicraft is different and a bit complex. The whole process of creation, innovation and making of the traditional handicrafts is deeply ingrained in the cultural heritage of the craftsmen. Touching the root and taking the course of any change process for innovation and creativity in this globalized environment, thus, requires a conscious, methodical and sustained intervention process.

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