

(Working Paper)

Empowering Women Artisans: A Cluster Based Development Approach¹

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Abstract

Artisans are identified as a vulnerable class of workers as they exist at the periphery of global and local production. Their position as a 'privileged stratum' of workers was threatened by the advent of industrial capital. They were either displaced or became proletarianized losing autonomy over their tools and skills. Globalisation of production has also adversely affected vernacular crafts through the availability of cheap substitutes. The increase in subcontracting of production has meant that overtime artisanal work has become a home-based subsistence activity where women are preferred over men as they are a cheap and flexible source of labour. The domestic nature of work has made it insecure and unsustainable.

The State can act as a development agent along with non-governmental organisations to support the artisans. However, such efforts are piecemeal in nature. The cluster-based development approach is an alternative model where continuous learning is possible. The study looks at the viability of such a scheme in India which was launched by the government in the year 2001 and the ways in which it can be made more effective. The preliminary findings are based on a pilot field survey of two artisanal clusters in Delhi which points to the presence of institutional infirmities that stand in the way of its effective implementation.

Introduction:

Marx considered “artisan” as a petty bourgeoisie who lives off his own labour and may also employ other workers, while Engels described them as a privileged stratum of workers or “labour aristocrat”² in nineteenth century England and their position in the workplace depended on their skill and craft organisation.³(Hanagan, 1977).

At the end of the nineteenth century, the artisans’ position was threatened by industrial capitalism and their existence as a privileged stratum was at stake. Far from their pre-eminent status many artisanal workers were struggling to maintain their control of production against

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² “The apprentices journeyman was the ideal type of labour aristocrat, not only because his work called for skill and judgement but because a “trade” provided a formal, ideally an institutionalised, line of demarcation separating the privileged from the underprivileged” (Hobsbawm, 1984, p.358)

³ In nineteenth-century Britain artisan referred to skilled wage-worker. In the eighteenth century the actual word universally used in working class circles is “tradesman”(Ibid)

employers. The artisan's skill was the only indispensable factor of production and personal tools symbolized their independence. However, factory production and the control of tools by the management compromised their autonomy. (Hobsbawm, 1984, Hanagan, 1977).

During this time, the artisan was not only deprived of his independent shop but also subjected to constant threat from machine production. In large factories the increase in division of labour led to a lesser dependence on skilled worker and the changing work rules led to the emergence of employer controlled hierarchy of foremen and supervisors in place of the erstwhile worker-controlled craft organization of labour. The apprenticeship programmes made the worker proficient in a multitude of tasks and led to the generalisation of skills. However, the process did not totally shorn the worker of all his skills, all at once, instead the machines ate away the workers knowhow only gradually and transformed the artisanal worker into skilled the industrial worker (Hanagan, 1977). The artisan's objection to capitalism was not so much to the working masters or to the machinery as such but to the capitalists who were seen as unproductive and parasitic middlemen (Hobsbawm, 1984).

Bottomley (1965) classifies the artisan in the developing country as one who works in a small shop, uses simple tools, works long hours and gets low returns. He belongs to the pre-industrial stage and tends to disappear with the coming of factory production. The displaced artisans should be given employment in agriculture or industry or may be engaged in production of handicrafts for export which is more popular universally.

The Impact of Globalisation:

In the last few decades of twentieth century globalisation has transformed production dramatically through the mechanism of global supply chains where production is dispersed across borders forming a complex network. It has affected the labour market of artisans in a significant manner both by providing opportunity and acting as a threat. On the one hand, globalisation has opened opportunities by providing markets in the West which helps in reviving dying crafts and providing avenues for employment generation. However, free trade and mass production has out priced handmade products such that it impoverishes the lives of the artisans and makes this an unattractive vocation for potential job seekers. Besides existing artisan are

dependent on traders and middle men who exploit their vulnerable position by providing them low piece rates so much so that many artisans choose to shift to other occupations that are more rewarding or join the ranks of casual labour in the informal economy. Thus, artisans are relegated to the periphery of both global and local capitalist economies (Scrase, 2010)

The commodification of craft production also increases with globalisation, where the artisans, wholesalers and first world department stores are linked through a commodity chain. The effect of this integration can be quite severe locally. In Indonesia commercialisation of textiles created 80,000 jobs while wiping out 41000 traditional artisan jobs (Scrase, 2010)

There is a status distinction associated with craft. Elite craft are basically decorative art which adorn the body or physical spaces. These are luxury goods such as ivory work, gem setting, fine weaving- that are high quality, rare and exquisite produced for the elite consumer in distant markets. They have prestige value and their demands are affected by fashions and changing tastes. Quotidian craft goods on the other hand are produced for everyday use such as handbags, wall hangings, jewellery etc. which are largely for global mass consumption. Vernacular crafts are similar to quotidian craft as these are functional objects for everyday use but are usually traded locally. *“These are construed as something static and timeless, in contrast to the dynamic changing modern world”*⁴ and as such face threat from global production as plastic utensils replace clay pottery and synthetic cloth production displaces cotton weave (Scrase, 2010, Venkatesan, 2009)

One way to rehabilitate displaced artisans is by providing employment in the export sector. The exported goods should conform to quality, should be standardized and produced in bulk before they are sold and requires some amount of capital investment. These cannot be provided by individual artisans and therefore require government intervention. Once the volume of production reached a certain proportion the government can hand it over to a co-operative and move to another line of production. The government can also disengage from production altogether after making sufficient investment in one line of production and allow demonstration effect to take over so the success can be replicated in other products (Bottomley, 1965)

⁴ Greenhalgh, 1997:31 cited by Venkatesan 2009

Handicraft is categorised as a state subject as defined in our constitution and thus the state governments have the primary responsibility to develop and promote handicrafts. The central government also plays a role to promote the sector through various schemes. The All India Handicrafts Board was established in 1952. Even though India has pursued economic reforms since the 1990s the sector continues to receive support from government. However, the crafts people have not been able to derive much benefit from these schemes for lack of assets and strong institutional backup. Other impediments include lack of proper knowledge of handicrafts units and number of artisans. Government also selectively promotes those crafts that have viable markets and high potential for exports while neglecting other crafts (Jena, 2010).

Government as a Development Agent:

The Gos and The NGOs act as development agents for creating groups of artisans, providing them with training for better product design and provide marketing facility through government outlets, fairs and self-marketing ventures. The purpose is to provide them with the opportunity to learn and generate sustainable income so that they do not have to depend on middlemen. Such an intervention envisages a gradual process whereby the artisan is first trained in the production techniques, helped with funding for product creation and subsequently given marketing support (Sarkar and Banerjee, 2007).

These schemes are temporary as they are conceived to play only an enabling role. Once the necessary know-how is imparted the artisans are left to their own devices. Therein lies a significant drawback as the artisans don't get support on all quarters. For instance they may receive adequate training in product design but may not receive financial or marketing support or vice versa. So it is suggested that instead of these piecemeal efforts the interventions should be continuous so that there are greater chances of success. However, it is not a feasible proposition as it tends to be costly and time consuming (Sarkar and Banerjee 2007).

The alternative is the adoption of "the cluster development approach" which promotes targeted joint action by groups of stakeholders for continuous development. The quasi –hierarchical

relationship is important in this regard where small firms comprising micro artisanal units supply to one large or medium sized firm often located outside the cluster in the value chain. Once such a relationship is forged it ensures a natural learning process regarding cost and quality control which enables the artisan cluster to upgrade itself in the value chain and develop into a mature cluster (Sarkar and Banerjee, 2007).

The caveat is that the above learning process may not be inevitable and even the large firms can turn exploitative to extract maximum surplus and may not create conditions for learning. The poor and low skilled artisans are the worst affected and therefore require support from the government.

In India, the Government has started programmes to support the handicrafts sector as it is seen as a sector that has potential to generate employment and contribute to export earnings. The Cluster Approach is projected as an important scheme for the empowerment of craft persons. Baba Saheb Ambedkar Hastashilp Vikas Yojana (BAHVY) was launched in 2001-02. It is a need based approach for integrated development of potential handicrafts clusters with participation of the craft persons at all stages of implementation of the scheme. The scheme envisages a package of support to the cluster of handicraft artisans, which includes five broad interventions. These are 1) Social interventions such as formulation of project plan and mobilisation of artisans into self help groups 2) Technological interventions such as supply of improved modern tool and training of artisans 3) Marketing interventions organising exhibitions and campaigns and entrepreneurship development programmes 4) Financial intervention such as margin money support, wage compensation to cluster managers, credit guarantee etc. 5) Infrastructure related interventions such as establishment of resource centres and e-kiosks, creation of raw materials bank and other technological support.

The study broadly seeks to find out how government intervention through the cluster approach helps in the empowerment of artisans especially women by considering different aspects of their livelihood challenges faced by the government agencies themselves in their outreach and management of the scheme.

An artisan cluster is defined as geographically concentrated (mostly in villages/townships) household units producing handicraft/handloom products. In a typical cluster, traditional community is often associated with the production of a unique product for generations (Sarkar and Banerjee, 2007).

Methodology of Pilot Survey:

A questionnaire was designed on the basis of the objectives of the study. Several questionnaires related to similar surveys were referred to for this purpose. Since NGOs are implementing agencies for the cluster scheme they had to be approached for getting information on artisans. In this regard the Development Commissioner's office gave contact of two NGOs i.e. AIPSS and URIDA which had implemented the AHVY in Delhi in the year 2005 and continued up to five years till 2010 . The NGOs gave information on the cluster supported by them. Accordingly two clusters were surveyed. One in Kakrola, an urban village South West Delhi and the other in Pandav Nagar in East Delhi. The former is supported by URIDA and the latter by AIPSS. These NGOs are active not only in Delhi but in other states as well and thus have a pan India presence. Ten artisans were identified from each area and administered the questionnaire. Since some of the artisans were not literate or semi-literate, it was important to verbally ask them each question in a non-intrusive manner. Out of the 20 artisans surveyed 18 were associated with the NGOs for more than a decade. This tends to imply that they derived some benefit from the actions of the NGOs. Since the time of implementation of the project was several years ago, the artisan could not give very precise information. Nevertheless, the survey gave important insights into the implementation of the scheme, its impact and future viability. It also drew attention to the precarious living condition of these artisans. The questions were tabulated for analysis.

Key preliminary findings of Pilot Survey:

The following are the preliminary findings of the survey (Table 1):

- The artisans surveyed are all female, married and home-based in the age group 35-48 years. The women are housewives and the primary income earner of the household is the husband who himself is engaged in occupation which can be called precarious, such as being self-employed as street vendors, owners of small shops, plumbing etc.

- The main craft work that the women are skilled at is embroidery which they do with hand. Some of them learnt it as a hobby prior to their marriage. They felt they could use it to support their family after they got married. It is important to note that these women do not possess adequate educational qualification to seek jobs outside their home. At the same time they do not wish to work in a factory as they do not like to be bound by factory regulations and prefer to have flexible work schedule which they can get if they work independently. The primary reason for working at home is to look after children and attend to household responsibilities. Interestingly, none of them are prevented from going out for work. As one woman provides a rejoinder saying “why else would they be sent for training and workshops if there were restrictions to go out.”
- The main disadvantage of work is the low incomes they receive in the form of piece rates. The long duration of work is also a deterrent. However, all respondents say that they wish to continue with this work. This may be because they do not have better prospects.
- All the women are members of self-help groups and have been provided artisan identity cards from the government.
- The women are unable to recall precisely the duration of the training received which they say ranged from 15 days to one month.
- They received training in skill enhancement which has helped them to use less effort as a result their work output improved. The marketing training also helped to sell their produce. But their main concern was that get opportunity to sell at craft fairs only on a few occasions. For example only twice a year.
- About 50 percent of the respondents said that training improved their income prospect. But the rest felt that training is irrelevant if there is lack of work. They highlighted that the main difficulty was that of securing continuous work orders from NGOs or other bodies. They would ideally like to have more work orders or access to credit to start their own enterprises. The latter they feel is the biggest hindrance as they lack collateral or don't qualify for schemes that have unrealistic rules and regulations.
- The artisans prefer to receive training in product development on a continuous basis so that the latest market trends are known to them. None of them wanted to receive training from private agencies as they felt these have commercial motivations.

- The artisans feel that NGOs have supported them in a constructive manner and they feel confident to be part of self-help groups. Besides the training programmes, they seek support primarily for health care as none of them have access to any social security.

Conclusion: The cluster approach is beneficial for the artisans. However, lack of continuous work has rendered the efforts ineffective. If parallel policies are designed to impart skill and provide access to credit, it can improve the livelihoods of the artisans.

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