

Handicrafts: A potential catalyst of Development of rural Odisha?

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Abstract

In this paper attempts have been made to study the potentials and challenges of handicrafts sector in the process of development of rural Odisha. In fact, the roots of handicrafts sector can be traced to the ancient and medieval history of Odisha. The contributions of Handicrafts were enormous towards the sustenance and growth of traditional economy and cultural heritage. But due to the negligence of rulers of the later period, the sector lost its significance. However, it is high time for the revival of glorious past for the making of a modern and prosperous Odisha.

Introduction

Odisha has one of the finest traditions of handicrafts in the country, which goes back to the ancient and medieval times. The ancient rock-cut caves and beautiful stone carvings engraved in the Khandagiri elephant caves in Bhubaneswar, Sun temple at Konark, Lingaraj, Mukteswar and Rajarani temples in Bhubaneswar, Sree Jagannath temple in Puri, Biraja temple at Jajpur, Ratnagiri and Mahavinayak at Chandikhole provide a glimpse of the rich tradition of crafts, art and sculpture in the ancient Kalinga/Utkal empire. The traditional crafts like wood and stone carvings, dye weaving textiles, folk and *patta* paintings, brass works, applique, filigree and jewellery work had flourished side by side with royal patronage, household needs and ritualistic needs of the temples in the State.

The traditional handicrafts such as stone carving, wood carving, silver filigree, applique, *patta* painting, coir, metal brass works hold enormous space and potential for economic empowerment and provide gainful employment to the technically unqualified and less educated poor in the rural non-agricultural sector. Apart from that, handicraft products of Odisha are popular all over the country and outside because of spectacular designs, natural motifs and superb colour combination. These traditional craft industries of Odisha have, however, historically passed through many stages of ups and downs. During the British rule it was almost dead due to the negligence of the British rulers to the indigenous craft sectors. However, the Government of Post-independent period realised the significance of this sector in the economic empowerment of India. Thus, one could see setting up of Khadi and Village Industries Commission, Handicrafts Board, Handloom Board, Coir Board and Central Silk Board with the main objectives of development of the rural economy and culture.

In fact, these popular crafts hold good market potential and they provide employment to a large number of artisans in the state. Besides, there are some special crafts

which are typical to the State and localized in the specific regions. For example, the Jari work of Cuttack, special brass work of Bhatimunda(Tangi,Cuttack), stone carving of Chhatia(Jajpur), cloth flower garlands of Tusra in Bolangir and Baleswar town, glass beads of Berhampur and theatrical dress making of Cuttack, coir products of Sakhigopal (Puri) and applique work of Pipili(Puri). In addition to that, there are certain rare crafts and today these are at the verge of extinction.

Potentials for rural development

The export oriented crafts of the State mostly consists of brass and wares, stone carving, coir products, silver filigree, terracotta, plastic toys, and the horn crafts. However, given the rich tradition of handicrafts in the State, there are ample growth opportunities present in the handicraft sector, such as:

- Strong global interest and appreciation.
- Huge skilled and low cost manpower base.
- Rising overseas market for quality products.
- Social interventions and structures.
- Traditional knowledge base.
- Rising inflow of tourists into the State

Problems faced by Craftsmen

Barring the case of a few artisan workers in the selected handicrafts like stone carving, wood carving, patta painting, etc. having high potential export value, the working and living conditions of craftsmen in many other handicrafts of the State are very poor and miserable. Even the silver filigree artisans of Cuttack are now living a very distressful life and the craft has now lost its popularity because of the dominance of middlemen and trader entrepreneurs. Many among the craftsmen fail to get craft based employment round the year and the wage earned by them from handicrafts work is so low that most of them live below the poverty line.

Traditionally, raw materials used by artisans were widely available due to the close linkages between evolution of crafts and locally available materials. Further, the jajmani system, which consisted of a reciprocal relationship between artisanal castes and the wider village community for the supply of goods and services, provided artisans with access to community resources. However, with the breakdown of these traditional structures, along with competition from organized materials against orders, albeit at high prices, or switch to non-traditional raw materials. Besides, production is seasonal, as crafts activity is suspended during harvest season and most artisans engage in agriculture to supplement their livelihoods. Informal nature of the sector and the low education of most artisans create many infrastructure related problems such as work sheds, storage space, shipping and packing facilities. Craft producers also suffer greatly from lack of working capital and access to credit and loan facilities. In general, artisans borrow from their local moneylender or trader at high interest rates. Owing to the breakdown of the historic artisan-consumer relationship, and the increasing urbanization and globalization of markets for crafts, artisans have difficulty understanding how to tailor their products to changing demands. Further, today rural youth are increasingly disinterested in continuing their family craft traditions.

Measures to revive the craft sector

There are various welfare measures devised by Government for the welfare of handicraft artisans such as training of craft persons, introduction of new designs, and techniques to improve marketability and productivity of craft goods, organisation of marketing programmes, and exhibition-cum-sale of craft goods, opening up of sales emporium for the craft goods, construction of workshed and workshed-cum-houses and group insurance as well as health insurance. However, such schemes seem to be implemented only half-heartedly by the State Government.

This is the time for the sector to explore public private partnership models to bring about greater efficiencies. Such an approach will promote sustained growth of the handicraft clusters and sustained earnings for the artisans. Different clusters may be at different stages of development, hence require a different set of interventions for development. There is a need to clearly define production infrastructure, forward and backward linkages as well as any other critical infrastructure gaps that may be present. Some of the projects are discontinued due to lack of commitment and insufficient manpower of the implementing agencies. Requisite experience in handling handicraft sector and management skills in handling large projects need to be some of the major criteria in selection of implementing agencies. The artisans have no / limited role in the selection of the implementing agency, sanction of project, preparation of project report, identification of project interventions etc. This leads to development plans that may not necessarily be in line with the needs of the artisans, who are in fact the end beneficiaries.

Conclusion

Handicrafts have the potential to provide gainful employment to the craft workers with very little financial investment mainly by exploiting their inherent strength and skill. It is the high time to address these emerging challenges and gear up the handicrafts industry of rural Odisha in the interest of rapid economic development.

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