

PROBLEMS OF RURAL ARTISANS

**GHAZALA SHAHEEN
GUEST FACULTY
VANIJYA MAHAVIDYALAYA**

Introduction

- ➔ India is one of important suppliers of handicrafts to the world market and the sector has been amongst India's leading foreign exchange earners.
- ➔ Export earnings from Indian handicrafts industry for the period 1998-99 amounted to US\$ 1.2 billion (Rs.5,400 crore). Yet, this sector is still not completely explored in light of capability and potential that exists for it.
- ➔ Central and state government entities, voluntary non-government organisations and co-operatives all are trying to achieve holistic development of Indian handicraft industry, large part of which has its origin in tiny hamlets across India.

Introduction

- ➔ **The development of rural artisan sector will lay a strong foundation for the sustainable development of the rural economy. It will lead to increased disposable income of the rural artisans who are mostly belonging to the relatively under privileged sections of society.**
- ➔ **This will save the relatively less informed and less privileged rural artisan from the exploitative designs of traders and intermediaries, who make the maximum at the cost of craftsmen and customer.**

Artisans

- ➔ **The specialists, who produce goods and render services, for and to others, are what we call artisans today.**
- ➔ **They are heir to the traditions and make it into a work of art.**
- ➔ **Most craft people have learned their skills from their parents and grandparents as a continuity of tradition, which is being passed on from one generation to another.**

Artisans

- ➔ **As a socio economic group, artisans are amongst the poorest. Research shows that households headed by artisans, in general have much lower net wealth and almost all (90%) are landless. Some have managed to adapt to changing times, and a few even thrive but most of them live in dismal poverty.**
- ➔ **Many of artisans have given up, and moved away from their traditional occupations. Others continue because they do not know anything else.**

Artisans

- ➔ **Research indicates that majority of the crafts persons and their progeny do not want to join the crafts sector; they would not even mind the tradition coming to an end.**
- ➔ **In one of the studies it was revealed that in more than half the traditional leather artisan households, several family members have given up leatherwork, and are working as casual labourers.**

Handicrafts

- ➔ Handicrafts are rightly described as the craft of the people. In India, craft is much more than an industry; its produce is viewed as a creation and work of art.
- ➔ As Craft Council points out, no Indian craft is ever purely decorative. Most of them while fulfilling a positive need in daily life of people, also act as a medium of self-expression.

Handicrafts

- ➔ **Craft is also viewed as one of the strategies adopted by individuals/ households to support themselves and to build on their existing assets.**
- ➔ **Task Force on Handicrafts for the VIII Five Year Plan defined the term handicrafts in 1989 as: ‘Handicrafts are items made by hand, often with the use of simple tools, and are generally artistic and/or traditional in nature. They include objects of utility and objects of decoration⁶.’**

Challenges for the Rural Artisan Sector

➔ Disappearing Markets: Substitution by Mass Production Goods:

- Cheap plastic products have wiped out the market for earthenware in many types of handicrafts.
- In hugely competitive market, advertising and global trade scenario, artisans are loosing on account of lack of viable support systems. Mass-produced goods are steadily replacing utility items of daily use made by craftspeople, destroying their very livelihood.
- With ever-increasing competition from mill-made products and decreasing buying power of village communities due to prevailing economic conditions, artisans have lost their traditional rural markets and their position in community.
- It means that craft producers need more support than ever if they are to become viable and competitive.

Challenges for the Rural Artisan Sector

- ➔ **Abject Poverty:** In spite of the high percentage of people employed in this sector and huge export earnings most craft people live in abject poverty. The average income derived by a craftsman is Rs 2000 per month. For an average family of five members this amounts to Rs 13.50 per day per head.
- ➔ **Lack of Financial Support:** There is reluctance at the financial institution's local branch level or procedural delay on account of lengthy paper work to provide financial assistance to the craft people. They sometime have to pay bribe even to get subsidies from the government.

Challenges for the Rural Artisan Sector

➔ The Unorganised and Diverse Nature of Craft

Activities: The nature of this industry has prevented politicians and policy makers in India from understanding or formulating effective policies or strategies by which this segment of the population can be part of a general advancement.

➔ Lack of Proper Quality Control and Standardisation:

Along with the aesthetic and traditional values that the handicrafts represent, they must maintain some degree of standardisation and quality control.

Challenges for Rural Artisan Sector

- ➔ **Correct Sizing:** The sizes of the cotton made-ups need to be as per conventional standards so that the exquisitely designed fabrics and made ups can be ordered in bulk by the reselling institutions.
- ➔ **Lack of Training and Feedback on Product Design and Product Development:** Market trends and consumer preferences for the colour, design, patterns change quite fast these days. By the time the rural craftsmen have changed to the newer set of preferences, they have already changed significantly to something different.

Challenges for Rural Artisan Sector

- ➔ **Lack of Marketing Avenues with Least Number of Intermediaries:** The exhibitions, fairs and handicraft stores are now prevalent in much larger number than they were earlier. But still more needs to be done.
- ➔ **Fluctuating Rates of Raw Material:** In carpet industry small producers making handmade carpets compete for same supplies with large factories.
- ➔ **Inadequate Infrastructure:** The infrastructure with which rural artisans produce their handicraft is quite inadequate in comparison what there should be in order to satisfy the consumer demand.

Challenges for Rural Artisan Sector

- ➔ **Wages for the Craft People are Meager:** Even the highest wages are low relative to the earnings of many others in the agriculture or other non- farm activities. Weber, in her study on Chikan embroidery workers in Lucknow, India discusses that low skilled work been promoted for very low wages. Quality of work can only be sustained if the craft people can obtain a living through working for the market.
- ➔ **Irregularities in the Supply of Work:** It means there is forced underemployment. Even though the State Governments have opened various centers for the sale of finished products, these do not ensure sales high enough to sustain craft people (through out the year would be ambitious) even for six months.

Challenges for Rural Artisan Sector

➔ Lack of Working Capital and Easier Access to Credit:

Lack of finance and cash flow is crux of craft people's problems and restricts the economic development. Inability to access government funds leads them to taking loans from local middlemen and moneylenders- at exorbitant rates of interest. This leads many Indian craftspeople into a form of bonded labour. As more than 90% of rural artisan households are landless they have minimal resources to mortgage or use as collateral for a loan. Thus, informal credit plays a critical role in the production and expansion of artisan's enterprise.

Challenges for Rural Artisan Sector

- ➔ **Technological Obsolescence:** This gives factory sector an edge over artisan sector in terms of efficiency and quality. Modern technology has enabled machines to imitate even the most intricate designs that were once the exclusive domain of the artisans. Any form of innovation implies an element of risk and investment of capital. Given that most Indian artisans live on the margin of subsistence, they have virtually no reserves to invest in technological innovation (physical capital).

Challenges for Rural Artisan Sector

- ➔ **Lack of Marketing Acumen:** The rural artisans belong to lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy knowing only how to create handicrafts as means of livelihood to support their families in the hard conditions in the backward regions of the country. But, they might not be good at skills to market them in the remunerative markets in bigger towns and cities.
- ➔ **Lack of Access to Key Markets:** Difficulty of access to urban areas that are the main markets for craft products.
- ➔ **Production Problems:** Rural artisans lack guidance in product design and development based on an understanding of the demand of the market. Even when they know what has to be done in most of the cases they do not have adequate means to do so.