THE HANDICRAFTS STORY & TOURISM

An important element of tourism should ideally be cultural exchange between different communities, as it exposes tourists to multiple worldviews, practices, social modes and artforms each time they travel to a new place, fostering mutual respect. Not only are they introduced to different culture, but the cultural knowledge and arts and crafts carried back by the tourists as souvenirs, inform others about the lives and culture of the local people.

According to the Survey of Foreign Tourists Expenses on Handicraft (2002) undertaken by the Ministry of Tourism (MoT), craft products form an important part of the purchase made by tourists. Though the contribution of domestic tourists’ expenditure is not as high in comparison with foreign tourists, it is still significant as, for every international tourist, there are 80 domestic tourists in India thereby contributing through sheer numbers.

Given the close linkage between tourism and souvenir products, the tourism sector holds huge potential for marketing and publicity for handicrafts. However, bringing craft products and tourists together, through the artisans and local culture, raises pertinent questions about the nature of tourism promotion and its implications for artisans. Focus on marketing and publicity of the product leaves no space for artisans to talk about the cultural significance attached to the product and the aspiration that tourism would bring cultural exchange remains unfulfilled.

PROBLEMS ARTISANS FACE

Artisans continue to suffer as they are largely unorganized, and many reports and surveys substantiate the deteriorating status of traditional craft communities owing to the following:

- Being susceptible to exploitation by middlemen and shops/ emporiums who do not allow artisans to receive a fair price for their products.
- Neglect from the central and state governments, which is evident from the non-availability of reliable and disaggregated data of the number of artisans (clusterwise or statewise) and the sector’s contribution to the generation of employment or foreign exchange.
- Lack of skill improvement and technological upgradation.
- Lack of specialised markets or access to market information.
- Non-existence of basic infrastructural facilities, like clean workspaces, storage space, safe drinking water, access to roads, limited supply of electricity.

• Non-availability of quality raw materials at affordable prices.
• Limited access to credit facilities from banks due to inability to produce collateral security.
• Lack of institutional linkages of the artisans and very often the artisans are not even aware of the existence of central or state government institutions meant to provide support to them.
• Limited provisions and inaccessibility of social security by the artisans.

What makes artisans especially vulnerable is when they are not a part of a collective/association/group, they lack the bargaining power for accessing schemes and policies or fighting the middlemen.

WOMEN IN HANDICRAFTS

Handicraft being largely a home-based industry absorbs large number of women as it allows them to manage their domestic responsibility along with their work. The National Council of Applied Economic Research survey (1995-96) shows that women constitute 47.42% of the total workforce engaged in handicrafts, of which 37.11% belong to SC/ST category. There are certain crafts, which are practised predominantly by women like embroidery and mat weaving. However the contribution of women labour remains invisible in the market. The Census of Handicraft Artisans 1995-96 reports that women in almost every household, practice embroidery work by hand, though participation in the commercial aspects of sourcing of raw materials and trade of products is limited. Therefore, they are seen as shadow workers and not as actual craft persons by society and are subsequently paid lower than their male counterparts. Their significant contribution in the sector remains ignored as focus is more on promotion and marketing of handicraft products.

WHAT IS TOURISM DOING TO HANDICRAFTS AND THE ARTISANS?

Strategies adopted by MoT to promote marketing of crafts speaks volumes about their intention to generate foreign revenues and not actually about promotion of crafts. Promotion of the art demands interaction between artisans and tourists which is primarily missing in the current approach. Selling craft products through emporiums and showroom isolate the products from its association with local human and natural resources. There are instances where market centres have been built by the government and products are being imported from outside the region which hinders artisans to be part of the mainstream process. Further, it does not contribute to strengthening the identity of the artisan which boosts self-respect along with respect for their occupation.
One of the major challenges faced by artisans is poor access to the market, in which tourism has a significant role to play. A rising trend at tourism destinations is the inauthenticity of the souvenirs sold, especially, where traders/middlemen sell products with false claims about source of the handicrafts. The presence of middlemen is a well-known phenomenon in the marketing of most handicraft and handloom products, especially at tourist destinations, which also inhibits the artisans’ access to the market. As they charge high rates of commission for their services of sourcing customers and promoting their work, the artisan faces the additional cost burden. Since it is a prevalent practice, there is always the pressure for the artisan to pay competitive rates of commission to be able to sustain in the market. As a result, both the tourist and the artisan is cheated, and the artwork itself is reduced to a mere price tag.

WHAT CAN BE DONE? 🌟

Historically, for many communities struggling for justice, collectivisation has proved to be an effective tool in gaining back rights, access to schemes and credit, fair pricing and fighting detrimental practices.

Linking co-operatives with rural tourism initiatives can be explored and strengthened as they intend to promote rural art and craft, culture and heritage which is very much a part of an artisans’ life. The initiative offers space for interaction between the artisans and tourists which would help tourists to develop an understanding about the handmade products and build trust for the price they pay. This will also help co-operatives to meet the challenges posed by middlemen since the entire process from production to marketing can be part of the package.

Strengthening guiding proves to be crucial in establishing the identities of artisans in tourist destinations and specially in culture tourism destinations. Unfortunately very often, the work of guides is reduced to that of ‘route guides’ where their primary role is to ensure that tourists are able to travel according to their itinerary. Influencing the attitude of guides towards artisans will go a long way in building mutual respect between the artisans and the tourists.

Participation of artisans needs to be ensured at policy level as well as at each level of training programmes. While ensuring minimum wages, providing employment opportunities and ensuring safe and secure work condition, is the need of the hour, it is also important to bring the artisans at the core of production and marketing processes, to build ownership to their craft products and ensure they retain the intellectual rights to their work.
The steps taken for protection of crafts include registration of crafts for their Geographical Indication under Intellectual Property Right (IPR) Act as a way of protecting arts and crafts. Handicraft/handloom products are covered in the list of classification of goods that can be registered as geographical indication (GI) under the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act 1999 (GI Act) under Trade related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). GI is an indication of identified goods showing its link with the place of origin in terms of its quality, reputation and any other characteristics that are caused by the place of origin.

GI applies to a specific region therefore, held collectively by all the producers in the region and hence not be produced outside the region as quality of the product is very much attributable to natural and human resources of the region. It ensures that no one from the region is excluded from enjoying the benefits. If GI is claimed by one person, then it does not take away the same from another individual in the region either.

It is time the State and tourism industry recognises that while they might have contributed to the promotion of crafts in tourism destinations, their approach has caused cultural erosion and serious damage to the identity of artisans. The artisans need to be seen and valued as an artist by giving the craft products their rightful place in its cultural context and not a manufacturer of items. Collectivisation of artisans will strengthen their stand to access their rights and pave the path for their own development.

EQUATIONS is a research, advocacy, campaigning organisation charged with the vision of democratizing tourism in India. We study the social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts of tourism on local communities. An area of our work is on impact of tourism on artisans and traditional artforms of a place. We have studied the various issues regarding the exploitation and suppression of artisans in Rajasthan, how tourism has changed the nature of production as well as market access and the how the artforms themselves have suffered.

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