



UNTAPPED POTENTIAL: *Requires investments for survival.* PHOTO: RAJU V

production to delivery to consumers, the report suggests.

Broadly, artisans are divided into the following categories: skilled master craftsman, wage-worker, fully self-employed artisan, and part-time artisan, with a rigid hierarchical division of labour between more and less skilled artisans in a particular craft. An estimated 63 per cent of artisans are self-employed while 37 per cent are wage earners. An estimated 71 per cent of artisans work as family units and 76 per cent attribute their profession to the fact that they have learnt family skills. It is important to note that most official figures count only the head of the production unit and wage earners in official figures, leaving out the five to six family members who

A threadbare existence

Aarti Dhar

Craftsmanship is the backbone of India's non-farm rural economy with an estimated seven million artisans (according to official figures) and 200 million (according to other sources) engaged in the profession. They use indigenous modes of production, traditional skills and techniques to make a living based on handmade products.

However, it remains by and large an unorganised and informal sector with its market potential untapped, except a handful of successful craft-based ventures like Fab India and Anokhi.

Propelled by loss of markets, declining skills and difficulty catering to new markets, a large number of artisans have moved to urban centres in search of low, unskilled employment. According to the United Nations, over the past 30 years the number of artisans has decreased by 30 per cent, indicating the need to re-invest in artisans to safeguard history, culture and an important source of livelihood.

The government, the private sector and non-profit outfits are each involved in the sector but their roles have evolved in silos, with little specialisation and much duplication. On a policy level, a cohesive and concerted effort is required to overcome the challenges faced by the crafts ecosystem through funding and programmes.

Simultaneously, the private sector has a significant role to play in uplifting artisans through different market-led efforts made by retail chains, high end-fashion designers and a relatively more recent wave of social

Artisans and their indigenous crafts are being pushed to the brink due to fierce competition and lack of cohesive government support



ADVANTAGE: Crafts production provides employment and earning to women.

PHOTO: K. GOPINATHAN

businesses. Non profits have been particularly active in the crafts space since the early 1960s and have evolved numerous models to support artisans in earning better livelihoods. To realise the full potential of the crafts sector, the gaps, overlaps and challenges in the value chain must be overcome to create an ecosystem that enables crafts to thrive.

According to a recent report by Dasra titled 'Crafting a Livelihood: Building Sustainability for Indian Artisans', a philanthropic organisation, harnessing the potential of this sector requires different types of investments focusing on artisan sustainability, including nurturing artisan talent, developing new business approaches, creating demand for crafts and encouraging institutional participation.

Pointing out that the global market for handicrafts is \$ 400 billions of which India's share is below two per cent, the

report says that the country has a tremendous growth opportunity. Another added advantage is the low energy requirement since production processes used in crafts typically have a low carbon footprint and promote use of locally available materials as well as natural and organic materials where possible. Crafts production provides a source of earning and employment for otherwise low skilled, home-based women, improving their status within the household.

According to the 12th Five-Year Plan, handicrafts production is expected to double between 2012 and 2017 and exports are projected to grow at the compounded annual rate of 18 per cent per year during the same period. As a result, the craft sector will employ an additional 10 per cent of individuals per year. The crafts value chain encompasses the full range of activities required to bring a handicraft product from conception through

report says. "While crafts received royal and aristocratic patronage during pre-Independence days and played a central role in Gandhi's independence struggle, they have slowly lost relevance with the advent of industrialisation. Currently, the sector carries the stigma of inferiority and backwardness, and is viewed as 'decorative, peripheral and elitist'. This is compounded by the government's treatment of crafts as a sunset industry, which has resulted in a lack of well-developed policies and programmes to protect and strengthen the ecosystem for artisans," the report says.

Traditional crafts have largely been marginalised by mass-produced consumer goods, which tend to be cheaper due to the economies of scale associated with mechanisation. Catering to the mainstream market often necessitates a decline in quality and/or workmanship, leading to the eventual loss of skills over a few generations. There are very few instances where a traditional craft has successfully "contemporised" itself for Indian or overseas markets. The four main challenges facing artisans in creating sustainable livelihoods in today's economy are low productivity, inadequate inputs, fragmented value chain and lack of enabling environment by way of official neglect. "Investing in the crafts sector today presents tremendous opportunity...including stable employment and income generation opportunities, the ability to capture a greater share of a significant global market and preservation of unique cultural assets," the report says.

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