

Craft of India: Luxury context

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Abstract

India has always been famous for its rich tradition and crafts worldwide. This was the reason why even most of the invaders were attracted towards India. Nowadays tourists travel to India getting allured with the myriads of Arts and crafts practises present here. With exports rising every year, today, Indian Handicrafts have shown a great potential in the domestic as well as international market. But this rise in the demand of 'Handcrafted Indian Products' at the global level has also opened doors for many threats that may result in the exploitation of artisans and the craft itself (As happened in case of 'Chandua of Pipili'). As such, it becomes quite important that crafts must have a higher perceived value, globally, to satisfy the needs of the artisans and the entire craft industry itself, it must turn into luxury. This Paper takes this argument forward and tries to explain the reasons why it is important to turn craft into luxury.

Keywords: luxury, handicrafts, *Chandua of Pipili*

Introduction

When Pixel-perfect fails to state the level of intricacy and benchmarks do not suffice to quantify the quality standards, this is the level of manual dexterity that is involved in the manifestation of Indian Handicrafts. Be it hunting tigers and Stags from the wild imagination onto the canvas of gold, from 'Thewa' or highly intricate patterns embroidered with fine wires of gold and silver, from 'Zardozi', Indian handicrafts have always left people perplexed. But this is not just about manual dexterity, because such level of detail and intricacy can only be achieved with extreme dedication and diligence and thus craftsmanship cannot be defined as a mere skill to manipulate material & form, rather it is an operation involving the complete coordination of mind and soul, that works in absolute synchronization and results in the expression of the artisans emotions and spirit into the material form, making the craft and craft products exceptionally exclusive which cannot be replicated easily. Such high order of craftsmanship and the equally rich culture has helped preserve India's rich legacy and heritage throughout the centuries and brought respect and recognition from all over the world.

All Indian states embody their own style and origins of craft, building an extraordinary treasure trove of unique craftsmanship. In fact, the rich and exotic appeal of high-quality handicraft goods produced by communities and tribes across cultures - be it through the bold use of colour, patterns, texture or design - is widespread, spanning the remote interiors of the country. This has not only successfully attracted demand for them from the domestic market, but has also enabled this sector to carve a niche in the global market, making India the world's major exporter and supplier of handicrafts. According to an ASSOCHAM study, India's handicrafts exports are likely to cross the Rs 17,000 crore

mark by the end of the current fiscal year 2015-16. It is further expected to cross Rs 24,000 crore by FY 2020-21.

Lot of entrepreneurs have entered this sector. Most of them aim at providing employment opportunities to the artisans and reviving the traditional crafts of India. Few of them have been successful in creating a worldwide demand for Indian Handicraft Products. But this rise in demand has also opened doors for many threats that may result in the exploitation of artisans and the craft itself.

Evolving Design phenomena: Case Study

Consider the case of 'Chandua of pipili'. The Applique work like *Chandua of Pipili*, in Puri district of Orissa is an internationally well-known craft. Broadly stated, the appliqué work refers to the cut out decoration or ornament fastened to a larger piece of material or surface. It is a technique by which the decorative effect is obtained by superposing patches of coloured fabrics on a basic fabric. The appliqué units manufacture a variety of items, such as, *Chandua* (canopy), decorative umbrella, bed cover, window screen, vanity bag and different wall hangings. These articles are made using simple types of raw materials like, coloured cloth, glasses, threads etc. the skilled artisan fashion many attractive designs including different animals and birds like elephants, lions, parrots, swans, peacocks etc. Most of the designs are highly artistic and traditional in nature. But these days some of the modern designs are also being experimented, to suit the tastes and the preferences of the foreign tourists keeping an eye over the market. The process of making *Chandua* remained largely unchanged for the past few centuries but during the last two three decades these have undergone tremendous changes. The *Chandua* makers attribute two reasons for such change in the appliqué work; the first reason is the changing taste of the

customers and the second is the commercialization of the products. They believe 'when the survival of the appliqué work owes it to the tourists, it is the choice of the tourists that has effected a change on the products and its making style. Customers want the products to be cheaper and attractive. Artisans go for more profit, at times ignoring the quality. The traditional products like *Chhati* (large umbrella used during religious ceremonies), *Batua* (special type small bag to carry betel leaf and other accessories), *Bana* (flag) etc are fast disappearing from the appliqué market and instead wall hangs, garden umbrellas, lamp sheds, cushion covers and letter bags are now prepared as they are very much in demand by the tourists. Besides, in accordance with the demands of the consumers, attractive motifs like coloured *Surya Mukhi* Parrot, Dancing Peacock, Elephants are gradually getting withdrawn and more and more of Monochrome and patch work are in use.

Analysis of the prevailing factors and conditions

Such an intervention into craft where using the substitutes for the original raw material, speeding up the process & changing the motifs and designs, that hinders the originality and heritage of the craft, possess a major threat to the Indian Handicrafts sector, which is being one of the negative impacts of the globalization. Also other factors like exploitation of the artisans by the middlemen, turning their skills into mere labour, persuade artisans to think of choosing other professions over pursuing craft.

What most of the entrepreneurs are doing is that they are trying to cater to the mass market by trying to make the products affordable and feasible, which is constantly dragging artisans towards the bottom of the value chain.

Craft has always been a basic activity in human society, articles of everyday use were made with the perfect blend of utility and aesthetics. Though it started to cater to the local society, crafts eventually evolved to become intricate and exclusive to ensure (1) certain standard of quality in the products meant for special occasions (rituals), and (2) to provide the finest of products to the patrons and to the other influential people in the society without affecting the making of craft products for daily use.

But now, most of the utility products of everyday life are mass-produced, made by machines. And we should accept the fact that craft products, made with hands, cannot compete with mass-produced products in terms of affordability and availability. In practice of doing so, we might end up creating pressure over the craftsman to discontinue the craft or deteriorate the craft itself in terms of material, process or design. Though it is also equally true that crafts can never be divorced from utility and artisan's (and its community) daily life, but this just couldn't provide value to the artisan.

Therefore, it becomes quite important that crafts must have a higher perceived value, globally, to satisfy the needs of the artisans and the entire craft industry itself, it must turn into luxury.

Luxury and Perception: Case Study

Luxury depends on the perceived value of a product/experience. Higher the perceived value of something, more are the chances to consider it to be luxurious. Luxury is

nothing but a perception towards something that we call luxurious, and this perception depends on the person's personality and the context. If a desired combination of this personality and context can be discovered or created, we might create or provide a perception to see an object/service as luxurious/ luxury. And this very perception can turn craft products into items of luxury, and may result in the identification of the true value of crafts and recognition, respect & benefits to the craftsmen and more.

This is exactly what happened in the case of Swiss watches. Watchmaking was a craft that now has turned into luxury.

Watchmaking began in Switzerland after the Huguenot refugees brought the manufacture of portable timepieces to Geneva in the second half of the 16th century. At that time, Geneva, the city of Calvin, was a veritable boom town. In the 19th century, Côte-aux-Fayes and its neighbouring villages would have been entirely cut off. And that, they say, is one of the factors that enabled the development of the Swiss watch industry. The original inhabitants of the Jura were mostly farmers, who tended their crops or their cattle throughout the warm months of the year. But when winter closed in, they were forced indoors. Staunch Protestants, they were allergic to idleness. And so while the women sat by the fireside making lace, the men constructed wooden puzzles and toys, and then complex clockwork mechanisms – and finally timepieces, which they would travel into town to sell as soon as the snow thawed. There is a further explanation, also linked to Protestantism – or rather, to Calvinism. Under the church reforms implemented by theologian John Calvin in 1541, the wearing of jewels and finery was banned. This forced Swiss goldsmiths and jewellers to turn their hands to another trade: watchmaking. The Watchmakers' Guild of Geneva was established in 1601. Soon the city became so crowded with watchmakers that newcomers established themselves in the calm of the Jura, an area already known for its talented craftsmen. According to the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry (<http://www.fhc.ch>), by 1790 Geneva was exporting 60,000 watches a year.

Switzerland was threatened by the makers of quartz and LED watches in the United States and Japan in the 1970s. Mechanical watches involve supreme craftsmanship to ensure that timepiece is working just fine. It's like a universe in itself. It takes about 163 parts to get even the simplest of automotive movement right which can further extend to 200 to 300 parts for including features like day, moon phases etc. On the other hand Quartz and LED watches are very much easier and faster to make, also they do not require any special expertise that only certain specific workers can do, like in case of mechanical watches, in fact quartz and LED watches can be mass produced. Though Swiss watch industry might have lost its importance or identity against affordable and easily available Quartz and LED alternatives. But it fought back by insisting on authenticity, craftsmanship – and luxury. The Swiss watch makers sought more excellence in terms of movements and processes and newness and rarity in the materials. They considered design and technological intervention to improve the process and product to make them exceptional and even followed various marketing strategies like high prices, advertising, branding etc. to position themselves as Luxury Brand. Today, with mobile phones in

trend, when watches are not even considered to tell time anymore, when Quartz and LED watches are struggling, authentic Swiss mechanical watches like Rolex, Rado etc. are still ruling the international market.

Crafting Luxury

Talking about Luxury, as per dictionary meaning, it can be defined as a state of great comfort or elegance, especially when involving great expense or an inessential, desirable item which is expensive or difficult to obtain or a pleasure obtained only rarely.

It may be well quoted that luxury is a basic human need – a way of winning something back against the cruelty of life. The urge appears to have been there from the beginning. In his 1992 book *Histoire du Luxe en France*, Jean Castarède mentions a 30,000-year-old ivory figurine known as the ‘Venus of Brassenpouy’. He notes that she has braided hair. ‘As bizarre as it might seem, one of the first concerns of man (or woman) was not clothing or protection, but seduction.’ Ornamentation predates clothes and weaponry, he argues. Castarède also points out that early man shared another of our basic urges, which is to dream. Dreams and longings provoke not only self-expression through art, but also the impulse ‘to single oneself out through ornamentation, make a mark through monuments, seduce others by acquiring or giving rare objects, and finally to better enjoy life by improving one’s food and surroundings. *Voilà le luxe.*’ In other words, man has

aspired to better things since he first glimpsed the stars. The primitive impulses behind our desire for luxury also nudge us towards a clearer definition of this slippery word. As Castarède suggests, luxury is often associated with the realm of the senses: voluptuous images, tastes, odours and sensations. Indeed, sensuality is a key component of many luxury brands. Christopher J Berry offers further clues in his book *The Idea of Luxury* (1994). He writes that luxury is often, erroneously, perceived as all that is superfluous. But ‘if it takes six screws to secure a shelf then more than that number are redundant. [and] a seventh screw is not a “refined” luxury good.’ Instead, Berry submits the idea that a luxury is a refinement on something that already exists. It is not superfluous, but it is substitutable. In other words, any second-hand jalopy will get you from A to B, but driving a Bentley provides an additional sensual pleasure. Berry remarks that luxuries generally have a wide appeal, even though they remain out of reach of the majority. Antiquarian books and rare stamps may be extremely precious to niche groups of collectors, but despite their value they are not considered luxuries. All of us, however, can imagine enjoying a weekend at a five-star hotel. For Berry, luxury falls into distinct categories: food and drink, clothing and accessories, shelter and leisure. These are areas where the basics are available to most of us, but where luxurious substitutes are available to a few.

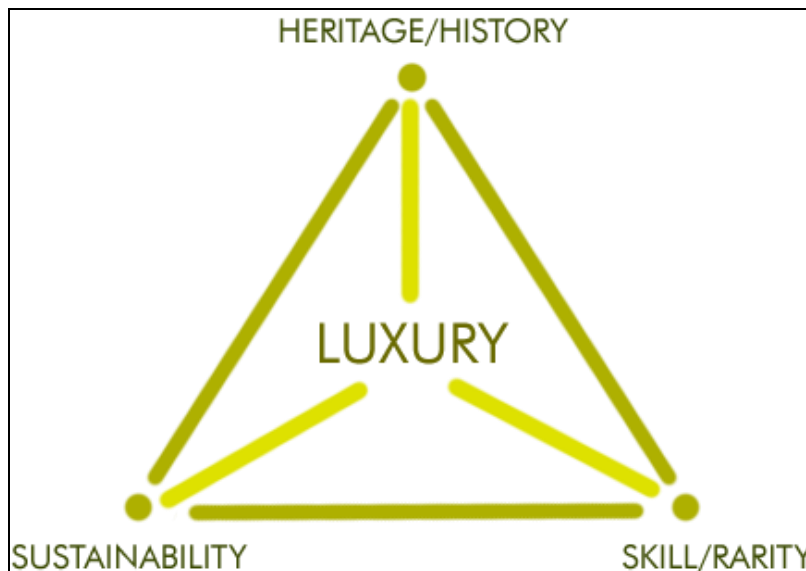


Fig 1: Luxury Heritage Model

Conclusion

Concluding all that, Luxury is something that is extreme in its quality and exclusive in its identity, something that cannot be easily recreated, and something that stand out amidst all its accessible and affordable counterparts.

Now if we look back to Indian handicrafts, it has got everything that makes it a luxury in itself. With finest of the processes involved and best & rarest of the raw materials used, Indian handicrafts present utmost level of exclusivity along with the insight to rich cultural heritage of the country, making it a pleasure obtained only rarely. Recreation or

creating replica of craft products is almost impossible without the expertise that can only be achieved with years of dedication and diligence. With its mass produced counterparts, craft products become inessential yet desirable.

The only thing which is sad, to qualify to be a luxury, the thing that craft is lacking is that it does not involve any great expenses; it is not that difficult to obtain. People desire for it, they very easily get it, they are being purchased rather being achieved. We are constantly trying to make craft products available and affordable, which are taking away this huge potential from Indian crafts to turn into luxury and the rule the

international luxury market to provide the artisan respect and right value for his magnificent work.

We need to understand that craft products need to be authentic over attractive, difficult to obtain (must involve greater expense) over easily available. We should target the niche rather the masses for marketing the craft products yet exposure and awareness must be widespread (In terms of branding and advertising). Pricing should be based on skimming over penetration.

Once we will be able to position the craft products perfectly (providing the right context to the right target consumers), then only people will be able to realize the true value of crafts. And this will collectively empower the artisan, craft and the country itself.

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