

UNIT I
OVERVIEW OF THE PAST



Kumbhakar

Kumbhakar is the ever-busy potter, who, like his forefathers, creates wondrous shapes, from simple water pots to entire temples, out of clay. He fulfills the needs of a largely traditional population...

1

CRAFTS IN THE PAST

LET us begin by understanding the myriad roles a craftsperson plays in the society as a designer, a problem-solver, a creator and as an innovator, leave alone the maker and seller of craft objects. The craftsperson therefore is not just the maker of an object, and a craft object is not just a beautiful thing—it has been created to serve a particular function to meet a specific need of a client.

For instance, the client or the consumer may ask the craftsperson to make him/her a cup which he/she can comfortably hold and from which sip a hot drink. The craftsperson, in this case, a ceramicist, will design a cup with a handle comfortable to hold, and shape the cup in such a way that it is neither too heavy nor too big.

In this example you can see that the client has given the craftsperson a problem to solve—to make a cup for a hot drink. The craftsperson has found a good solution to the problem by designing a cup with a handle. The design elements in this case are the handle, the shape of the cup, its weight and a suitable size to make it comfortable to use. If the cup is pleasing to look at, that would be an additional benefit and we could say that the cup designed by the craftsperson is also aesthetically pleasing. The critical factor, however, is not the motifs and decoration on the cup, but rather the craftsperson's skill in finding appropriate and innovative solutions to the client's problem.



RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIENT AND CRAFTSPERSON

There are three important factors to be considered in this case: (i) the client and his/her needs, (ii) the nature of the problem to be solved, and (iii) the craftsperson who is skilled and innovative enough to find a solution to the problem. Close exchange between the client and the craftsperson is very important for the end product to be appropriate. The client has to inspire the craftsperson to produce, innovate and create new and exciting objects all the time. The craftsperson, in turn, needs to understand the demand of the client. If the client orders a hundred *diyas* for Diwali every year, the order is quite routine and boring. Should the client ask for one stand with a hundred *diyas* instead, the potter has to work out how to make a stand that will hold a hundred *diyas* and still be easy to transport, to be repeatedly filled with oil and so on. Therefore the relationship between the client and the craftsperson is vital.

A craftsperson therefore has a very important set of skills by which he/she can design, invent, solve problems, create, and sell. Every country in the world needs such people who are skilled in creating practical, efficient solutions to everyday problems. Craftspersons skilled in fabricating with different materials, and communities who can constantly innovate and design new products to meet changing needs are necessary in all societies, ancient or modern. For instance, the everyday problem of having to carry large quantities of water over long distances was uniquely solved in Kutch—the *matkas* (water pots) fit into one another and can be balanced on the head of a woman, leaving her hands free!



Similarly, today we appreciate the talent of a person who designs a new computer application, or makes a breakthrough in technology.

In this chapter you will see that India has always had a large community of innovative craftspeople from the earliest periods of recorded history. It was the crafts communities of different regions who designed homes for the poor and the rich that suited the climate, built places of worship for any god that the community wished to worship, who made cooking utensils that simplified food preparation, created items for the home, and for people to wear, like textiles for different occasions and varying climates, and jewellery of all kinds.

CRAFTS FOR PROBLEM-SOLVING

Whenever you look at a craft item try and discover what problem the craftspeople have solved and, what the client may have asked for. You will recall that in the textbook, *Exploring Indian Craft Traditions—Field Study and Application in Heritage Crafts*, the first chapter, 'Crafts at Home', was a detailed exposition of the design aspects of the *lota* by Charles Eames.

Living Bridges

Here is how a curious problem was solved in Meghalaya, where the climate is hot and humid most of the year, where Cherrapunji was once the wettest place on earth. They needed bridges over their little streams and rivers so that people could cross with their belongings and animals. As you know, bridges around the world are built of wood, steel and concrete. However, in Meghalaya they could not use wood because it would rot, nor could they use metal of any kind or metal nails as these would rust. The problem was how to make a strong bridge across fast-moving rivers without wood or metal?

The solution they found is ingenious, brilliant and so useful! They learnt how to train the aerial roots of the *Ficus Elastica* tree to form a living bridge across the river that would not decay or deteriorate in the humid rainy climate. Over several years they had to train, bind and care for their bridge as it linked across the stream, then they placed flat stones on the cradle-like bridge to create an even footpath. This living bridge of roots lasts years and uses no dead wood or metal!



When we say that India has a long and ancient tradition of crafts we mean that we always had creative and innovative people who found interesting ways of solving problems.

The crafts and craftspeople of India are a deeply integrated part of folk and classical traditions and historical assimilations which together span many millennia. As articles made purely by hand for the daily use of both the common people in an agrarian economy and the urban elite, crafts reflect the cultural ethos of India. While the craftspeople have been cradled by the caste system, their skills were fostered by cultural and religious needs and the impetus provided by local, national and international trade.

—JAYA JAITLEY

Visvakarma's Children

CRAFTS SPECIALISATION

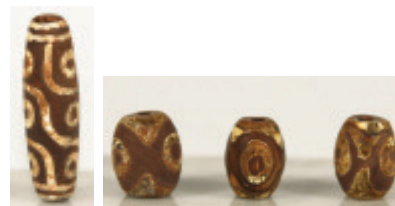
In India, as in most other parts of the world, the artisan as a specific social group emerged only when people began to settle and cultivate the land. While most people in these communities would busy themselves with



actually carrying out the various activities related to tilling the soil, a few began to specialise in different crafts. Some would make containers with straw, reed or clay to hold agricultural produce, another would make footwear, yet another would specialise in iron-mongering to create scythes and sickles, and yet another in the manufacture of cloth from flax and cotton.

Even today, in India, handicrafts form an alternative source of earning an income, providing the backbone of the economy for many communities. The rural craftsperson can easily plan his/her production schedule according to the local agricultural calendar and the seasons of the year. Craft production can be organised in those months when agricultural activity is low thus providing additional income to the family. Many women work at their crafts in their spare time, after completing their housework. In recent years there has also been a tremendous increase in the number of people turning once again to their traditional craft as their sole means of income. However, others only supplement their earnings with their handicraft products. This economic factor greatly contributes to the continuation and the alteration of the character and the production of the same craft, i.e., to make it market-friendly.

By the time of the Indus Valley Civilisation (3000–1500 BCE), a developed urban culture had emerged that stretched from Afghanistan to Gujarat. Here archaeologists have found votive figures of clay as well as clay seals, beads made of semi-precious stones, garments of cotton and earthenware of all shapes, sizes and design, all of which indicate a sophisticated artisan culture. The crafts community also worked out simple solutions to take waste water out of the houses by creating clay pipes. The waste water was carried by the drainage system under the city streets, and out of the city. To supply water to everyone in the city, builders and masons dug wells in the courtyard of every house. Five thousand years ago specialised crafts communities answered social needs and requirements with ingenuity and practical solutions that enhanced the lives of the people.





The Sangam classics written between 100 BCE–600 CE refer to the weaving of silk and cotton cloth. Weavers were already a recognised and established section of society with separate streets for them named *karugar vidi* or *aruval vidi*. In both the Chola and Vijayanagar empires (ninth to twelfth century) the weavers lived around the temple complex, weaving fabrics to dress the idols, drape as curtains, clothe the priests and the people of the locality, as well as to cater to trade from across the sea.

The manufacture of textiles was concentrated in three areas: Western India, with Gujarat, Sindh and Rajasthan as its focus; South India, in particular the Coromandel Coast; and Eastern India including Bengal, Orissa and the Gangetic plain. Each of these areas specialised in producing specific fabrics and specific motifs. There is evidence that various forms of economic organisation and methods of integrating craft production into the macro-system of the economy existed at different points in Indian history.

SHRENIS OR TRADE GUILDS

The *Ramayana* and many plays from the Gupta period and Tamil Sangam literature write in detail about the trade guilds or *shrenis*. These were professional bodies of jewellers, weavers, ivory carvers or even salt-makers who came together to control quality production, create a sound business ethic, maintain fair wages and prices, sometimes operated as a cooperative and controlled the entry of newcomers by laying down high standards of craftsmanship and enforcing rules regarding apprenticeship.

Each guild had its own chief, assisted by others. These functionaries were selected with great care. Guild members were even entitled to impeach and punish a chief found guilty of misconduct.

The *shrenis* were not necessarily restricted to a locality, and were known to move from one town to

another, over a period of time. Occasionally, *shrenis* (of merchants and artisans) came together in a joint organisation, called the *nigama*, or the equivalent of a chamber of commerce and industry. Some *nigamas* also included a class of exporters, who transported the specialities of a town over long distances, and sold them at higher margins of profit than those they could obtain locally. By all accounts, the *shrenis* were very sound and stable institutions, and enjoyed considerable moral and social prestige not only among their own members, but in society at large. This conclusion is borne out by their records, preserved in inscriptions all over North and South India.

The institution of guilds came under severe strain over the last five centuries. Writing in 1880, Sir George Birdwood observed, "Under British rule... the authority of the trade guilds in India has necessarily been relaxed, to the marked detriment of those handicrafts the perfection of which depends on hereditary processes and skill".

Artisans' guilds are almost unheard of in India today. The cooperatives promoted by the government, may be viewed as the modern avatar of artisans' guilds, but their success, so far, has been limited.

THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF CRAFT PRODUCTION

The bulk of craft production in India, until the colonial period, was for the immediate rural market, and craft items were produced in small units using very little capital. Since heredity determined the artisan's choice of trade in most cases, the family naturally developed as the work unit, with the head of the family as the master-craftsman, providing the necessary training to other family members.

The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (written in the third century BCE) makes a distinction between two types of artisans: the master craftsperson who employed a number of artisans on a wage to do the actual work for the customer and the artisans who financed themselves, and worked in their own



workshops. Artisans were remunerated either in kind or in cash. Nevertheless, in those areas where the use of money had not been introduced, service relationships and exchanges in kind may have existed. It is likely that the *jajmani* system evolved from these service relations.

THE JAJMANI SYSTEM

In many parts of India the *jajmani* system defined most of the transactions in the craft sector. The *jajmani* system is a reciprocal arrangement between craft-producing castes and the wider village community, for the supply of goods and services. The caste system did not permit the upper castes to practise certain occupations. As a result the patrons or *jajman* were dependent on *purjans* (cultivators, craftsmen, barbers, washermen, cobblers, sweepers, etc.) to provide essential goods and services for the village/urban economy. In return a fixed payment in kind was assured. This could be rent-free land, residence sites, credit facilities, food or even dung! Since most upper-caste people owned land, the *jajmani* system provided them with a stable supply of labour. Today



this system still holds sway over several parts of the country, though colonialism, competition, better communications and improved civil laws have all transformed it in their own ways.

In the Sultanate and Mughal empires of North India *karakhanas* (factories) were maintained by the State. This practice was followed by several other Indian rulers of the same period.

The slow decline of the Mughal empire meant a loss of patronage for the highly specialised crafts of shawl-making, stone-carving, jewellery, *meenakari*, luxury textiles, and miniature painting. In search of royal clients, craftsmen moved away from the Mughal court to find employment all over the kingdoms of Rajasthan (Jaipur, Udaipur and Jodhpur in particular), in the Deccan and in Bengal. But much of this was to change with the advent of colonialism.



The Mughals found on arrival in India that indigenous Indian art was as decorative as the arts of China, Iran and Central Asia. Since the number of foreign craftspeople coming to India was small, they depended largely on the skills of local people and the products that emerged from their work were neither imitations of foreign forms nor a mere continuation of Indian ideals. The Indian factor, however, became fairly strong in Mughal art and Emperor Akbar was a particularly keen patron. The *Ain-i-Akbari* tells us that the Emperor maintained skilled craftsmen from all over India. Akbar personally inspected the work of his men and honoured the best with bonuses and increased salaries. Special types of armour, gilded and decorated weapons, royal insignia, and a vast range of woven and embroidered textiles were commissioned for the royal household as well as for gifts. The shawls of Kashmir received a new lease of life, while the artisans of Rajasthan and Delhi made the finest court jewellery.

Fine handicrafts were the most sought after objects of high Mughal society. The emperor, his family and the nobility were its principal patrons and it was the indigenous artisan working in Mughal workshops who contributed substantially to the aesthetic character of the designs, bringing to his art a tradition of ideas and attitudes.

— JAYA JAITLEY

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TREASURE TROVES OF INDIAN CRAFTS

It would be interesting and instructive to compare and contrast craft products of different materials as they were produced in the past with those of today. To see wonderful examples of crafts of the past you could visit museums that have specialised crafts collections. There are fabled royal collections of art treasures, archives and memorabilia housed in palaces throughout India that will give you an idea of what a famous tradition of crafts existed in India through the millennia.

In the past 150 years over 700 museums have been established in India. Of these there are a few specialised crafts museums. Each of these has a different focus — concentrating on one craft, a single person's collection governed privately, or those established by the government. Information on some of these have been provided in the Annexure. Amongst the most famous of these museums are the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum (Crafts Museum), New Delhi; Ashutosh Museum, Kolkata; Calico Museum, Ahmedabad; Utensils Museum, Ahmedabad; Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad; Dinkar Kelkar Museum, Pune; and Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal.



EXERCISE

1. Investigate and find an example of an innovative design solution to an everyday problem devised by craftspersons in your vicinity. It could be adding a tap to a *matka*, creating a sequence of bangles aesthetically linked together so that they do not need to be individually worn, etc. Describe the 'problem' and the creative design innovation and purpose.
2. Through conversation with local artisans record a short 'oral history' of the development of a craft in your neighbourhood. Describe the evolution of craft products to meet contemporary needs.
3. Investigate the concept of crafts as a seasonal or part-time activity in the working pattern of craftspeople in your neighbourhood. How many are fulltime, part-time, seasonal? Make a table/pie chart of the same.
4. Make a list of crafts in your state that
 - are made by specialised crafts communities;
 - bring additional income to agricultural communities;
 - are made exclusively by women;
 - are made by men;
 - are made by a single artist;
 - are made by groups of craftspeople.
5. Describe how you would set up a museum corner for your school.
6. Explain why you think there should be a crafts museum in every state and whether it should have an all India perspective or focus on those local crafts that are disappearing.