



History and Heritage of Indian Handicrafts and its Market with Special Reference to Selected Handicrafts of West Bengal.

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Abstract- *The Indian handicraft has a 5000-year-old history and can be traced from the Indus Valley civilization period. From that time Indian handicrafts evolved into various forms. It not only accelerated on its own but it adopted so many outer things, when the colonial period started in this country the craftsmen and their art tried to adopt the taste of their foreign colonial masters and successfully made fusion handicrafts. If we divide the periods of the handicrafts of this country, we can say there are mainly three eras of Indian handicrafts, ancient, medieval, and modern, we can also say the pre-British era, the British colonial era, and the post-British colonial era. In this paper, we will elaborate on these periods and we will also discuss specifically a little about Bengal's handicraft market and try to create a deeper understanding of the history and heritage of the Indian handicrafts and its market.*

Keywords- *Handicraft, Artisans, History, Colonial, Market, Indian.*

History and Heritage of Handicraft and its Market:

Things that are made by hand are handicrafts. Back in the day, people used to make almost everything with their hands, be it daily household items or the equipment for farming or hunting, but with time technical excellence can be seen and this resulted from the evolution of craft and handicrafts. To make these handicraft items there were requirements of high skills and creativity.

The Indian handicraft has a 5000-year-old history and can be traced from the Indus Valley civilization period. From that time Indian handicrafts evolved into various forms. It not only accelerated on its own but it adopted so many outer things, when the colonial period started in this country the craftsmen and their art tried to adopt the taste of their foreign colonial masters and successfully made fusion handicrafts. If we divide the periods of the handicrafts of this country, we can say there are mainly three eras of Indian handicrafts, ancient, medieval, and



modern, we can also say the pre-British era, the British colonial era, and the post-British colonial era.

As we know from several documented evidence Indian handicraft has such an old enriched history, pottery, weaving, metal artworks, and jewellery making can be found back in the Harappa Mohenjo-Daro civilization, and there is enough evidence in the present time to claim that these product were used to be traded to the other civilization too.

In the pre-British era making handicraft products was the main livelihood for the Indian people and it was not just appreciated but also needed, back in the Gupta era pottery and metal works were very famous and appreciated, and in the Mughal era, the emperors used to appreciate the fine handcrafted arts and jewellery and used to arrange special exhibitions to showcase these priceless pieces made from the country's finest hands. When British colonialization started the handicraft market faced some hardships because the machine-made products and factory-made cheap and low-quality products started to dominate the local market. To resist the British government's dominance the Indian patriots started to promote the Indian handmade goods and crafts to save their culture and country but the British government declared some laws and regulations which created a great hurdle for the Indian handicrafts industry.

1. Ancient Era (up to 10th century) Pre-British Era(10th - 15th century)

From the ancient and medieval days, the handicrafts of India were very famous. There were mostly home décor, clothes, jewellery, and household things on the list of production.

Indian handicraft history is so ancient and rich that it goes back to 5000 D.C. and 3000 B.C. Over time it evolved and changed but it never lost its spark and meaning.

At first the theme of Indian handicraft used to revolve around religion and mythological beliefs but slowly people started to make it more contemporary and started to make every day utilitarian products. [crafts of India: the voyage of India mar30, 2021]

Handicrafts and small businesses were famous back in ancient and medieval Bengal. Jewellery specially made from silver, bamboo products, wooden works, mud, and clay products, and cloths were very famous in Bengal. We can see from history that the Ganges silk used to be exported to Rome and Greece. China and Arabs were also impressed by the Bengal's high-quality cotton and *rashm* silk.

Mughals used to preserve high-quality handmade cloths, art pieces made from Elephant's teeth, silver, and different metal art pieces. Mughals used to commission and appreciate the artisan and craft man so much that they made sure to give them work and used those works as gifts and souvenirs for others. In the Mughal period, craftsmen used to create unique and unusual products for the emperors which were rare.



In the making of handicraft products the craftsman used to play the lead role and because of this every piece carries a personal thumbprint and taste of its designer. [The Voyage through Indian Handicraft, Nov 1, 2018]

ii) Medieval Era (up to 17th century) British Colonial Era (15th - 17th century)

In Bengal, most handicrafts are from some rural small production units. These units do their work in traditional form and mostly they are village centered. These units use the raw materials that are naturally available in their surroundings like bamboo, jute, different types of hay and straws, different types of grasses, clay, seers, etc. to make products like baskets, clay pots, home décors, handbags, travel bags, carpet, jewellery, household things, cutlery, blankets, etc.; these products are not just useable but also durable, sustainable, and environmentally friendly as well.

To preserve the traditional heritage and identity of the country and state in the global market it is very important to make sure that the next generation also maintains the continuous flow of the production and export of these arts. These products at first used to be created for the royals and to showcase their heritage and royalty, but later on craftsmen started to produce them for the poor as well to fulfil their daily needs, then it became a souvenir to the rich and noble persons. One research shows that from Asia's seven countries, there are 84 million full-time people and 34 million part-time people involved in this production industry. The handicraft market plays a huge role in Bengal's economy; it plays an important role in the state's earning global money.

iii) Modern Era (till now) -> British Colonial Era (17th to 1947) -> Post-British Era (1947 to till now)

From history, we get to know why exactly the colonial period started in our country, mostly France, and England, and the Portuguese colonized India and stayed for a long time here. Even after their departure, we can still see the cultural colonization in different parts of India, like Goa, southeast India, and many more. Here we can see that the colonial culture still exists. These countries ruled over India for a long time which resulted in the cultural infusion or adaptation in our country very vividly and because of these the changes or infusion in arts and crafts are also very clear and vivid.

We all know that these countries especially the British came to this country by getting attracted to its richness and they started to trade the spices first and then slowly they got attracted to the other things this country owned, one of which was textiles and crafts. Back in those days, the crafts that India produced were mostly of high quality. It used to get exported to other countries. Slowly the production started to be manufactured focussing the other country's market. Changes happened in the crafts and designs and they started to be made in a manner that would be liked by those country's people. We have a vast history of the handicraft



market expansion in these countries which I have tried to discuss below. From the beginning cultural significance of Indian fashion wasn't so palatable to the Europeans. This was applied to Indian handicrafts too. No matter how skilful or impressive the artworks were the craftsmen and workers had to modify them four hundred years ago just like today to start trading in earnest.

Dutch and European merchants were very interested in Indian textiles though, because of the cheapness and the quality these textile products were called "chintzes" from the Indian word *chint* or in Portuguese pintados, which means printed or resist dye textile. At first in the 16th century, the main trading product was the spices from India, and the textile products were used to trade as bi-products, these trades were merely private not official, in the 16th century the Dutch, English, and Portuguese traders realized the importance of the textile. In the year 1613, the English merchants used the pintados to get more profit and understood this product would yield high. But still, the trade was unofficial.

As far as known from the sources these products came from western India like Rajasthan, Gujrat, khandesh, and also the Coromandal coast in the east, and traditional manufacturing is still done in these areas even today. From the history and museum collections, we tend to know that there are so many famous carpets from India that were shipped to England, France, and other countries in the 16th and 17th centuries, and these were made by the Mughal carpet manufacturers, which were very limited. The Banians used to gather around the coastal areas when the ships were used to come and gather their products which were mainly homemade. [casparpurdonclarke paper, Indian section, Victoria and Albert museums, London]

These few trading used to take place but the Indian traditions were never liked or cherished by the English later the designs were changed in the crafts and modified with the Western taste and demands and requests.

In France and England, there used to be a tile where the traded design modified textile from India people used it to cover their beds and furniture also, they hung it on the walls and it became so famous that the local craftsmen were alarmed and demanded a ban. In France in 1686 and England in the year 1700, there was a ban on these textile products. But in the year of 1774 Robert Clive's influential position in the East India Company gave him the immunity to hang these textiles in his apartment.

At this time there was the first Indian craftsman who in true form worked in the West name Ram Singh Malam. This young man has some well-attested traditions, he also was called the 'navigator' of Mandvi, Kutch in western India, and later in 1720 arrived in the Netherlands. This craft man blended the European and Indian pictures on the wall very enthusiastically.

Back in the colonial periods, the Portuguese were great patrons of Indian skills like inlaying woods with ivory, but the English weren't so fond of the traditional Indian handicrafts.



Back in 1784, a Muslim traveller then in Calcutta named Abdul Krim Kashmiri wrote "The company did not employ on a traditional scale for people of education or soldiers. Merchants were deprived of business in the public and private trade of the English. And the English have no taste for the handicraft of India, which the Indian gentle classes no longer had the means to support, leaving the craftsmen also without a livelihood."

In the book written by John Leighton published in the year 1853, he praised the "eastern art" by which he also meant Indian works, for its 'extremely rich conventional treatment far removed from nature, judiciously balanced and harmoniously coloured'. At first, it was the carved wooden furniture and home pieces, that were famous in the Western market, then the textile products got a place in the market because of the low price and good quality. After these, the Indian architectural praises started to echo in the Western world. With time the British realized that India had a valid craft tradition, as the Indian handicraft was gaining recognition in the British market, some were also talking about how some portions were losing their crafts and traditions. Not long after that, the question arose of how to preserve traditions and how it can find a market for their products. Sir Charles Trevelyan suggested establishing schools of arts in India. And sooner in Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Lahore, and elsewhere the art schools were established, but later in the practice, the Europeanization of the craft was encouraged. [Raymond Head, Indian crafts and Western design from the seventeenth century to the present, RSA journal 1988, vol-136 pp 116-131]

Later America Britain, France, and other countries were attracted to Indian products more; some of them were silk, wooden works, furniture cotton textiles, jewellery, and more. In major international exhibitions like 1886 India and colonials, and others around the world, the Indian arts, and crafts could be brought in quantity. The high-thinking Brigade was particularly attracted to the jewellery. [Ibid]



A brief scenario of Indian handicraft and its emerging market after independence



Father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi believed in Indian rural self-sufficiency, he used to say that India's development depends on its village and rural developments, he believed that the Indian villages are self-sufficient which means they don't need to rely on others to exist or survive, it can survive on its own and if we want to develop this country then we have to focus on the rural developments and the first rural development programs were introduced in the year of 1952 by the prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru which focused on the almost 75 percent of the India which were the rural areas. Even after these five years of rural development programs, there were so many more policies and steps taken by that time's government to develop and enrich Indian handicrafts and rural small productions.

Martand Singh used the phrase 'perennial potential' to describe crafts development in India and to capture the frustration of the people who work in those areas. In 1990 Indian handicrafts emerged hugely and within 8 years expand, 1993-2000 the export of the Indian handicraft market and handloom increased to Rs 100 billion from Rs 30 billion. Although the market has developed, the artisans and the people within this sector weren't doing good, they were struggling with even the basic existential needs.[Maureen Liebl, & Roy, T. (2003). Handmade in India: Preliminary Analysis of Crafts Producers and Crafts Production. Economic and Political Weekly, 27th December 2003-2nd January 2004]

In the years 2000-2001, a report was conducted by the Policy Sciences Centre, Inc. (under the direction of Frank J. Penna), and funded by the development grant facility of the World Bank on the Indian crafts market, the problems, and the ways to tackle them. This report is called one of the most detailed and updated studies on handicrafts by numerous people. [ibid]

In 1957 the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) was established by the Indian government. This commission supported small industries, some of which were not handicrafts, some were and some fell into a grey area according to the official given handicraft definition. Later different ministers dealt with different areas like 'cottage industries', and 'rural industries', and these industries lacked and have occupations that others don't have. The (UNIDO) United Nations Industries Development Organization listed 350 small and medium 'cluster industries' as 'traditional arts and crafts', later it expanded and the chart broadened. After this, there was a newly made rule came to the industry which says the well-off handicrafts especially a well doing exporting handicrafts will not get help from the KVIC. [ibid]

With time the handicraft market has changed just like the handicraft products, Indian handicraft market, and products started to expand and reaching put to the vast global market. European countries or whole Western countries already started to fall in love with these Indian authentic handmade products which raised the demand for these goods in the global export market. Along with the government, there are so many non-government organizations who are trying to promote and save the year-old cultural heritages of India, recently we can see many art houses starting to exhibit and preserve traditional handicraft pieces. These famous art museums are getting so much global attention which is good for the Indian handicraft market.



When we talk about the modern-era handicraft market we can't miss out on the global import and export market analysis which shows the handicraft market's clear map. And with that, it also provides so much data which proves and shows the positions of the countries in this global handicraft market. So far we can say that Asian countries are at the top in this market and ruling over here.

Conclusion

As we can see here the Indian handicrafts and cottage industries are deeply rooted in Indian society. It's not only a livelihood but also an undetachable part of its society and people. The handicrafts were and are a way of expression of people's beliefs and life. It is connected to the mythological beliefs of scientific inventions. When we try to track the history of Indian handicrafts, we see it has a strong rich history and legacy of its own, the respect and importance it had back in the day are something almost unchanged, just like before it still holds the richness of the Indian culture and reflects the beliefs of its society. With time it has learned to evolve and created its distinguished place in the world market with a promising future. In the near future we can say the market will create more opportunities and can play an important role in the nation's economy. It has the potential of spreading its roots globally and creating a stronger statement in the global market.



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