

Art-hi-shan: recreate the creator

The key business concern for artisans of specialised clusters is the market

India has around 3,000 artisan clusters, each producing a particular handicraft or handloom product. Many of these are widely known for their exquisite crafts. The eyes of octogenarians in the hand block printed textiles cluster of Jaipur light up recalling the past. "We are the creators of locally inspired floral patterns called *kharbuje ki booti, dakh bel, gulab ka buta*. Buyers came to take products from our doorsteps."

Ask any artisan in these clusters about their key business concern and the prompt reply is "market." Traditional-

ly, they used to sell their goods in their local village or nearby cities, mostly as utility products. A part was also sold through non-specialty traders. However, access to appropriate market became an issue with the opening up of local economies. Over the years, as cheaper mill and factory-made substitutes increasingly replaced the local utility demand of these exquisite goods, their market gradually concentrated in 'high-end' clientele, mostly in the metropolis and in recent decades in the international market—way beyond the reach of individual artisans and local traders.

A number of public agencies promote artisan communities at regional, national and international sales and by capacity building of their marketing effort. Specialised private agencies also promote them. However, new-generation marketers have resulted in traditional tastes, preferences or social customs—that used to determine product designs—losing significance.

Designs ceased to be created through local excellence, and became a complex function of colour, shape, aesthetic value and utility of a new generation clientele, and started becoming globally determined—much beyond the knowledge of the artisan. Thus, the artisans lost track of designing input, which was at the very core of the artisan community.

The outcomes were two critical evolutions. The creation of these artisan products involves three steps—product designing, skill and labour component of production, and marketing. Market-



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ing and product designing have already eluded the artisan community. The artisan is left with typical knowledge of production, often a family specialisation (tacit knowledge). However, even this forte was seriously challenged, directly by machine-made replica or indirectly by machine-made substitutes.

The labour cost, which otherwise had a skill premium for tacit knowledge, was floored to the minimum. In the absence of willingness to take up alternative pure labour-based professions, their restricted mobility had a negative impact on wages.

Here, provision of marketing and designing support by various public agencies have made significant contributions. New designs and markets sell well, create a ripple effect in the cluster and also germinate imagination. These are no mean achievements. But they come as packaged inputs—a new design, for production by the artisan. But most artisans are not trained to handle such

knowledge and can't internalise it, and end up as just producers.

It becomes imperative to provide continuous input of such knowledge at regular interval for the products to sell. However, such knowledge mostly comes as discrete inputs; because of obvious resource constraints of public agencies to provide continuous support for such design creation to a cluster. While short run targeted training programmes and occasional design and marketing inputs, for a cluster, should continue, the learning process needs to be strengthened at the roots.

We need to create designers from the artisan communities. Special support may be given for talented young artisans to undergo long-term training in designing, at reputed institutes with obligations to get back to their respective cluster and empower the community. Such exercises will also equip them with necessary market related skills.

This will enhance the process of knowledge penetration in the cluster and will set in a virtuous cycle and later a process of proactivity among the artisans. Such far-reaching ideas have also

been witnessed as private efforts of the odd upcoming artisan who has made it to the top through his own efforts and support managed from existing agencies. But they are a handful and left to the market, the iteration is not really in favour of such creation.

The writer works with the cluster development project of Unido. Views are personal

