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The Influences of Modernity and Globalisation on Traditional Artisanal Practices India

This paper is an overview of my ongoing practice-based doctoral research on traditional artisans in India operating in an increasingly modern and globalised environment. My research investigates possibilities for evolving contemporary artisanal practices so that traditional artisans can be equal participants in both the creative and economic realms of collaborations with NGOs and designers.

The destiny of craft in India has been shaped by colonial and nationalist ideologies and policies. The irony is that though their motivations were different, both these ideologies shared the preservationist approach to craft. Post-independence, traditional artisans have also been looked upon as objects of development. These dominant narratives influence government policies and interventions by NGOs and designers, where a commodity-based value chain plugging into the mainstream economy is seen as the only way to uplift artisans. This has not been entirely successful in producing the economic independence and social transformations that policymakers and NGOs seek.

I propose three key factors as essential to shifting the dominant narrative and imagining other possibilities for intervention:

1. A shift away from the current commodity value-chain and need-based approach to one which emphasises the capabilities of the artisanal community and recognises the hidden networks of value in the social, ethical and cultural realms of the community.
2. Evolution of a co-creation framework between the traditional artisan and studio designer which is sustainable and fosters equal exchange of ideas and long-term relationships.
3. Understanding how traditional artisans “think” design. How do we recognise the tacit, embodied, non-articulated language and aesthetic of traditional artisans and can this contribute to a Southern concept of design?

Through secondary research and expert interviews, I critically review the craft landscape in India and look at the interventions by the different organisations, the type of craft subjects that they have created, and how this has affected craft practice in general. Then, through the lenses of a traditional master weaver’s workshop in Phulia, West Bengal, an urban studio designer in Bangalore, a co-operative community of Lambani women embroiderers in rural North Karnataka, and my own practice in Himachal Pradesh with a community of traditional women weavers, I follow Gibson-Graham’s research into diversity of economic practices, to gain insight into the capabilities of the community, their non-capitalist economic practices, the economic models they follow and the social networks that support this model, and the similarities and differences between traditional craft workshops and designer studios. Understandings that emerge from this research will facilitate a more vibrant and economically active representation of traditional craft communities building better policy interventions and opportunities for community participation.

This research draws on Hosagrahar’s (2005) theoretical framework of indigenous modernities which “denotes the paradoxical features of modernities rooted in their particular conditions and located outside the universal paradigm centred on an imagined ‘West’” and “celebrates the simultaneity and engagement of the traditional and the modern”, Gibson-Graham’s (1996) research on community economies contributing to a post capitalist economic future and Soetsu Yanagi (*The Unknown Craftsman*), who exhorts the studio designer to not favour individualism, but to acknowledge their inspiration as coming from the rich and common fount of the traditional, unknown craftsman and to then pilot the craft along with them.