



Craftsmen of Sankheda

A Visual Ethnography project

Submitted on partial fulfilment of the requirements
of the degree of Master of design

By

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Declaration

The work done as a part of the written submission under this report “Visual Ethnography of Sankheda craftsmen” is done as the special project for post graduate program in Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay, India under the guidance of Prof. Nina Sabnani.

I hereby declare that all the content of this project is an original work with appropriate reference information or links provided wherever due. Any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the institute.

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Approval

This special project titled “ A visual ethnography of Sankheda Craftsmen” is prepared and submitted by Aswin S in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Masters in design in Industrial design. It has been examined and recommended for approval and acceptance.

Prof. Nina Sabnani

(Project Guide)

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Acknowledgement

My gratitude to my guide, Prof. Nina Sabnani who has been gracious towards my choices and supportive throughout the task.

The town of Sankheda and my time spent with the craft and its craftsmen were my maiden jaunt to rural north India. I am indebted to Prof. R Sandesh and Duttaram Chari for this opportunity to be at the receiving end of such warmth from the families at Sankheda. I also thank Prof. Purba Joshi, Course Coordinator, for coordinating the project.

I also express my love to my parents and the almighty for their encouragement and blessings. Thanks to Noa for helping in taking decisions at crucial moments of the project.

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Abstract

This visual ethnographic study aims at capturing the pulse of the Suthar community in Sankheda, a village in Chhota Udaipur district in the Indian state of Gujarat. The study was an experiential bliss to the heart of the craftsmen that embody the turned wood furniture craft. Me and my camera were met by heart-warming families that shared their life, its struggles and their craft with open arms. The study involved interviews with various craftsmen including a master craftsmen, a methodical documentation of the manufacturing process, qualitative analysis of their work environments, their involvement with the craft and the conflict of interests faced by present generations.

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A traditional Sankheda jhoola displayed in the Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai

Introduction

Sankheda Furniture is a traditionally evolved range of furniture made out of teak wood and finished in a wide variety of colour combinations. The town of Sankheda in Chhota Udaipur district is known for this handcrafted furniture which got its name from the term 'Sankhedu' – the term for lathe in Gujarathi language.

The main process involves wood turning using the lathe. It has a rapidly rotating piece of wood that is carved with chisel like tools to create wood pieces with varying profiles that are later finished. The beauty of this craft lies in painting the smooth wooden shapes. Traditionally, the turned piece was coated with colored lacquer. But today, lacquer ware production has disappeared in response to the competitive environment.

A whole range of decorative artefacts from wall-hangings, pedestal lamps, flower vases, pen stands to beautiful toys, rolling pin for the kitchen, supports for hammocks are produced from the village. Even though other turned wood crafts involving soft wood have faced serious market situations, Sankheda furniture is used in different parts of India and also exported to different parts of the world. The Sankheda craftsmanship is not restricted to making household furniture.



A kid's chair finished in pearl white and gold displayed outside Sanjaybhai's workshop



Visual Ethnography

Product design requires designers to respond to the demographic towards which the design brief is plotted. This calls for a cultural enquiry of the context in which the user dwells. The purpose of the seminar is to explore such contexts and develop possible opportunities in design.

Ethnography is a methodical recording of human cultures. Culture is a powerful human tool, but it is a fragile phenomenon. In its broadest sense, it is the cumulative deposit of behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

Ethnography is one of the qualitative methods used in anthropology. Ethnography has evolved to include visuals in the form of images and videos to complement written studies as they render a more inclusive research. Visual ethnography may start with documentation but goes beyond, to examine what role these artifacts play in the life of the artisans. It looks at their (artisans') behavior, rituals, and belief systems.

The initial idea was to explore any native communities and research on their interaction with the environment. Later it was shifted to a craft based community as a primary research in understanding their behaviour as well as the problems they face associated with their work. The life of Sankheda's craftsmen and their activities associated with the craft is a relatively less documented subject. The immense opportunity lying ahead drove me into deciding on a visit to the heart of this community.



One of the many furniture outlet showcasing Sankheda furniture.



Map of Gujarat showing the location of Sankheda town.



Reaching Sankheda

My visit to Sankheda was planned during the time of the Ganesh Chaturthi festival. I took a train to Vadodara which is the nearest city to the west of Sankheda. Since staying at Sankheda was a relatively difficult option I planned to go back and forth from Vadodara daily.

Sankheda village is connected to nearby villages and towns primarily by road. It is 1 Km away from Bahadurpur Village where the closest local train station is located, which is the Sankheda -Bahadurpur Railway Station. The village square has a bus terminal and a shared auto stand which takes care of the last- mile commute to and from the village.

The nearest City Vadodara has fairly good connectivity with the village by means of roadways and railways. From the Vadodara bus terminal, State transport buses are available to nearby villages at average intervals of an hour. Presently, there are 4 trains connecting Vadodara and Chhota Udaipur, two each in the morning and evening that go to the Sankheda Bahadurpur Station.

There are no local buses or taxi services in the village. The travel time from Vadodara Station to Sankheda- Bahadurpur station is approximately 1.5 hrs and from the station to the village is approximately 15minutes.



Sankheda Bahadurpur Railway Station



Finished chairs kept for drying outside one of the residences in the Suthar street.
Assembled parts of wedding pedestal ready to be transported.



A potter from Sankheda.



The façade of Vrajeshbhai's house



Scene from the main Bazaar of Sankheda



The potter's house





Rounded wood pieces cut and kept at Mahalakshmi Saw mill

Where it all starts

As I was going about the village, I caught sight of a sawmill next to a private school. I walked in and asked a worker whether they work with any Sankheda craftsmen. He said that they only dealt with doors and windows and directed me to the plot adjacent to it. The board at the entry read 'Mahalakshmi sawmill'. It is there that I met Jetala Vishrambhai Patel, who is one of the key suppliers of raw material for the Sankheda craftsmen.

"I got into this business after my father . Its my brother Purushothambhai running the lumber business next to this plot. Another of my brothers, Kandhibhai is running the business in the city." Jetalabhai points at his house nearby. He lives there with his mother, wife and daughters.

Jetalabhai adds "Its mostly from here that the craftsmen get the wood, I am the closest to the village". The craftsmen place their orders according to the quantity they require. If they place larger orders, the lumber is then transported in a lorry.

Craftsmen of Sankheda

It took me two hours on a bus to get to the village on the first day. Though I have been involved in projects based on crafts during my studies, this was my first attempt at actively interacting with a community to document not just their craft but their culture. My initial concern was gaining their trust and acceptance before I begin my work. I was introduced via a telephonic conversation to Arjun Suthar, the son of a craftsman in the village by one of my seniors, Duttaram Chari. Dutta had previously done a design project based on Sankheda craft. His project report and guidance have been a great input to this research.

The town square can be identified by a large gateway that leads to the Bazaar Road. The town starts with a market on either sides of the main road which then leads to different streets. On either side of these streets are residences, the ground floor of which serves as a commercial space for running the family businesses and the first floor being used as a space for dwelling. This had been the typical morphology of these business-oriented communities at Sankheda since decades.

I spent the evening walking around the neighbourhood. There was a private and a public school in addition to a junior college. A public hospital with an ambulance facility was also available to the people. On enquiring to a passer-by about the boards in local languages, I learnt that the languages spoken at Sankheda vary from local charotari, Surti, Kathiyawadi to Kutchi.



The verandah acts as the workshop area for many families



One of the many furniture outlets as well as display shops in Sutharwaga





The temple of Vishwakarma which acts as the centre of Sutharwaga

Craftsmen of Sankheda

Suthar Community of Sankheda

As I sauntered into the Sutharwaga, old houses stood on both sides of a narrow street with the temple of Vishwakarma at its focus. Suthars worship the God Vishvakarma primarily as they believe that the God brings them all the prosperity in their job and life.

People have started sporting western outfits although the elders have stuck to their traditional dhotis, kurtas and bandis. Festivals do however, call for traditional outfits amongst all. Majority of the people are vegetarians and a typical meal consists of dal, roti, rice, vegetables that ends with Chaas and sweets. I was fortunate to have been invited for a thali at a Suthar household.

About 24 out of the 50 odd families involved in this craft are the ones running their own businesses while the others perform labour on contract basis. And only 12 craftsmen out of this whole community are experienced enough to perform all the work involved in this craft. Them along with other craft based communities participate together in their festivals.



They make my story...



Vrajeshbhai



Divyesh



Praveenbhai



Dwarkeshbhai



Rita behen



Harpreet



Satishbhai



Kaushikbhai

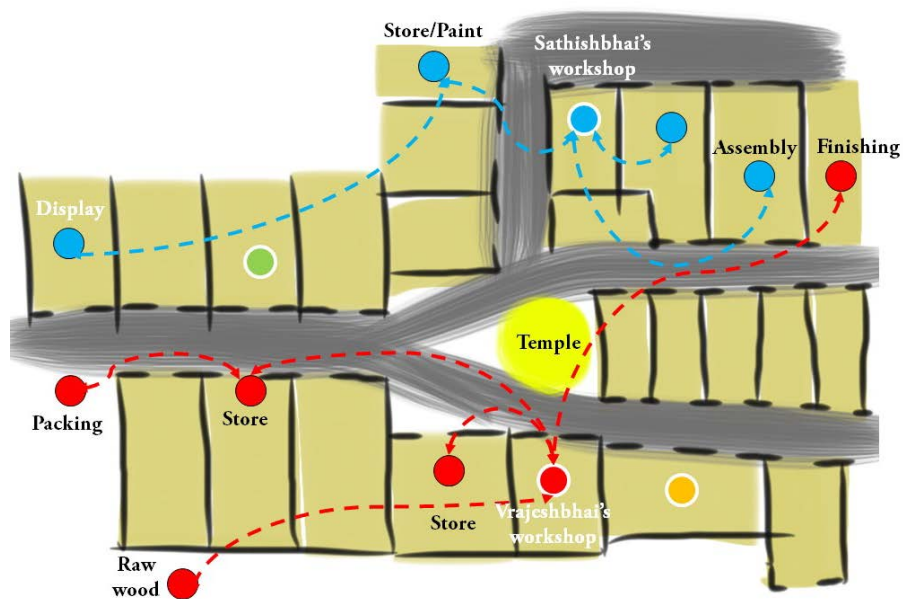


Illustration shows how families collaborate in the process of making furniture

Making of the masterpieces

Before visiting Sankheda, my preliminary research through online media and reports at IDC included the process of making furniture so that it would be easier for me to analyse their work culture, activities and techniques. I also found that this community works together to make the craft.

The teak wood pieces are cut as per requirement from the saw mill or using a circular saw. The wood is then chiselled on the edges to ease the lathe work. These wooden blocks are further stacked according to their respective sizes. These pieces are then stored in the store area and taken as per requirement to their workplace.

The teakwood is first turned into a circular profile of required dimension. Then it is carved into respective designs for the furniture. The turned pieces are then finished for the rough wooden burrs, gaps and holes. These gaps are filled with wood dust mixed with adhesives. Then these parts are smoothed by sand papers.

Putty is applied as the next layer to support the paint. The finished & polished wooden components are then painted with application of point by placing the component on a mandrel stock & rotating it & holding a brush dipped in paint.

Various line patterns are created by holding the brush tip against the rotating turned pieces. The painting varies from geographical shapes to traditional motifs. The natural colours and dyes are replaced by synthetic materials recently. The combination of brown & gold is most common.



Uncut wood stored in the open



Cut wood taken to workshop by labourer



Sankhedu- A typical lathe which is used for wood turning and finishing

Vrajeshbhai's workplace




A life crafted by work

I was greeted by Harpreet, cousin to Arjun Suthar whom I had talked to over the phone. Harpreet and the family were expecting me and I was taken aback by their hospitality. Harpreet's father Dwarkesh Suthar and Arjun's brother Divyesh Suthar run their workshop. I was soon introduced to their family members and other craftsmen. Not being able to distinguish between their home and work space, I soon realised that their craft was so integrate with their life that the workshop was also their home.

Vrajeshbhai is the master craftsman who passed on the technique and skillset to his younger son Divyesh Suthar. Divyesh is married and has a kid. Vrajeshbhai stays in his house with his wife Sunita behen. Vrajeshbhai's brother Dwarkeshbhai, wife Jayasree behen and son Harpreet also stay with them.

Dwarkesh Bhai has been working for almost twenty years. He took me through the process of making a Jhoola. Eventhough he was very busy, he happily explained the process of making the furniture and also the way the lathe works.



"We work till the work is over, sometimes there is less work. Sometimes we sleep very late. It depends on the demand"

Dwarkeshbhai preparing the wood part for finishing



*"Compromising quality
for money is the last
thing I will do in my job"*

Vrajeshbhai Kharadi is a master craftsman with almost fifty years of experience in the field

The growth of a master craftsman

In the afternoon on the second day, I visited Vrajeshbhai Kharadi. He had just come from the hospital after his regular check-up. He recognised me instantly and enquired about my stay and the status of my work. Vrajeshbhai Kharadi has been working in Sankheda since he was a boy. Currently his son Divyesh is taking care of the work. He told me the story of how he became a furniture craftsman.

Like his father, Vrajeshbhai was also brought into craft making very early on in his life. He remembers that he was 13 when he started doing it professionally. He had a lot to say about Sursurvekar, a business man who changed his life. Sursurvekar maintained a furniture factory in the city, which manufactured furniture. Vrajeshbhai joined him in his 20's to learn industrial techniques and design of furniture. He worked with him for 15 years. He says that its from his boss that he learned the importance of maintaining quality standards.

Sursurvekar realised that Sankheda furniture had the potential to survive in the market. Impressed by Vrajeshbhai's talent, he approached him with a business plan. Vrajeshbhai would be in charge of production and Sursurvekar of marketing and selling the furniture. Vrajeshbhai remembers that even though his boss purchased furniture from many manufacturers, his was the only one that did not go through any quality check. "He paid me more than others. If its my goods, he will just clear it without any checking, he knows how important quality is to me", Vrajeshbhai said.

Vrajeshbhai says, " He gave importance to packaging and marketing. He modified the early designs of Sankheda to better suit the demand. Soon the business flourished. The company

Craftsmen of Sankheda

grew to manufacture and exporters.”

He said that there were interest amongst customers from the US and Europe in the craft. “Even now we have demand from other countries. During their vacation people staying abroad come with orders in bulk. There are also good customers from your place, Kerala. Arjun does the marketing. He does the negotiation now because he is well educated.”

According to him there is a lot of competition among the manufacturers. He also understands that the craft has to change with time to survive. But the designs are still the same. “Middle men make money. The compromise between money and quality is a tricky thing. These days many are keen on making more money. When they focus on that, they compromise on the quality. Compromising on the quality for money is the last thing I will do in my job”. He adds to the conversation.

He says the value of the product is diminishing by the day and the only way to survive is by educating their children. “ My son, Arjun is getting married next month. The girl who he is to get married to is also doing an MBA like my son. But she is more intelligent. I think that our society needs to educate their girls for the welfare of the family. I think they both can drive the business together forward easily.”

Divyesh agreed to what his father said, and also added that there is a lack of the sense of community among the craftsmen today due to the way in which the businesses are set up. He was busy making the parts for a Jhoola.



“ My father has a lot of experience. He is right about the issues.”

Divyesh collecting the parts kept for drying outside the workshop



Satheshbhai's workplace

Sathishbhai's wife also help in the work depending on the amount of work. She adds finishing touches to the product at crucial times.

Making the craft indigenously rich

Satishbhai has been practicing the craft for almost twenty years now. He is confident that he can perform all the tasks including painting. He mainly handles the assembly of parts for his workspace. He took me through his work place when he was making a chair. He had just returned from the city. His wife was doing his work while he was away. His brother, Sanjaybhai lives next door. Sanjaybhai does the finishing works. He also makes cushions for the furniture out of plywood and foam.

He explained the assembling process step by step as he made the chair. He is very confident about his skills. He explained to me how he made different tools which are used for making the assembly easier. The circular saw work station had been customised for using longer parts. The joineries had also been modified by him for strength and stability. He uses a chair which has storage space in it. He also uses it for assisting in drilling.

He took me to his brother's house and showed me how he had developed the locking mechanism of the cupboard hiding its metallic parts. There is a heater that he made for hot water to both the houses. He said his father in law will be coming soon to help him with the work since he is going outside. He is from the village next to ours and comes here often.



"I can do most of the tasks myself."

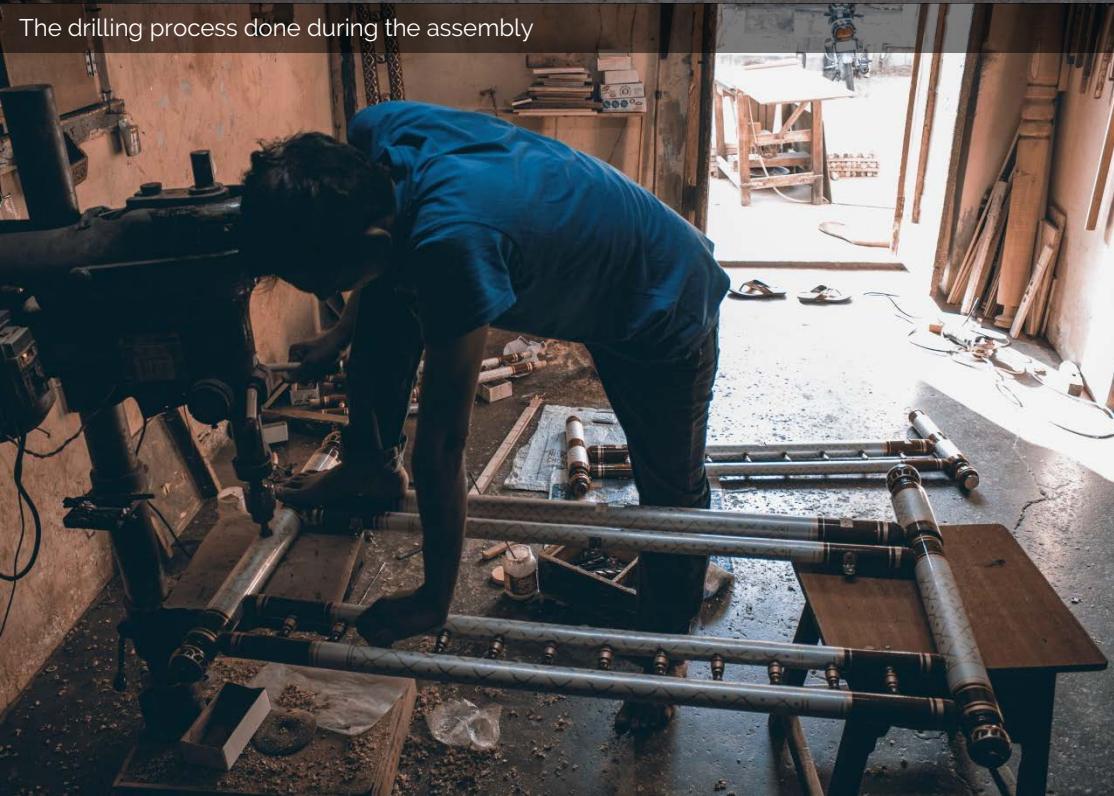
Sathishbhai with his son



Sathishbhai showing how he had modified his cutting workstation



The cutting process carried out during the assembly



The drilling process done during the assembly



Glue being applied before fixing the parts



A heater that was made to provide hot water in bathrooms




Sathishbhai's father-in-law also helps him in the work



Tea-break at the workshop



A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and red pants, is smiling and leaning over a wooden workbench. She is holding a large, dark, circular object, possibly a lid or a piece of wood, in her left hand. Her right hand is near a circular saw blade that is partially visible on the workbench. The background shows a rustic setting with a wooden door and a wall.

"We share our work with others so that everyone gets a living"

Craftsmen of Sankheda

A family crafts for a living

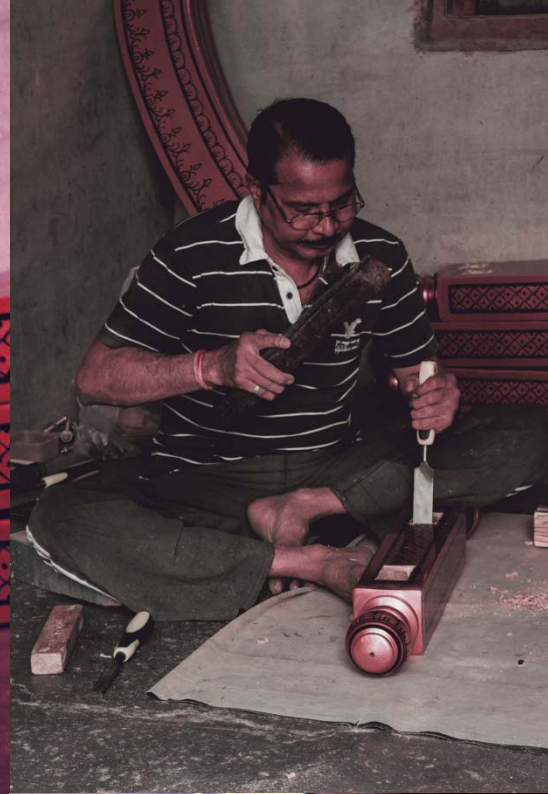
Praveenbhai Suthar and Rita behen work together. They are one of the families that don't sell furniture, but only do a part of the job. They handle assembling of parts. Since assembling relatively involves more manual labour, it takes almost four days to assemble a jhoola. "Its difficult to employ a laborer since the payment will be very less and nobody is available currently to take up the work. We share work with others craftsmen also, so that everyone gets a living.", they said.

This is the main concern they have. They are paid less compared to other craftsmen and since this is the only means of money for them, both of them work together to complete the work. Their son has a day-job. He works till the afternoon in the company. After he returns he also joins the work. He handles the main assembly and sometimes he has to stay up late in the night.

"But it is good that he is educated.", his mother said. The conversation then turned to the need to educate their families. They are uncertain if their future generations would stick to the craft.. Their son was taught the craft as a child and he continues to find time for it today. He used to sit and watch his parents do the work. He also took part in it at times. "Now he has grown up and its his decision whether or not to take it forward. He is interested in the work just like most of the younger generation.", she added.









"The work goes on till midnight. I sit like this every two hours to take rest"

Craftsmen of Sankheda

With Pain comes Precision

Kaushikbhai has been concentrating on painting for many years. He has two more craftsmen assisting him. The precision with which he drew his lines and circles with minimal instruments blew me right off my feet.

He is concerned about the frequent back pain he gets while sitting on the floor and working. I asked him if it is possible to shift to a chair. He said he can do it on a chair, but that it is easier while sitting on the floor. He uses a small stool to keep his work while painting. He says the work is continuous and tries to rest every two hours due to the pain. "I just lean on the wall, rest my legs like this."

The non availability of quality brushes is another problem. "These are brushes with natural hair. I don't get these anymore in the market. I think it is very costly. The plastic brushes do not work smoothly as these ones" he said. He works mostly on finished plywood parts and motifs. The craftsman next door does the cutting of the plywood. Finishing is also done there.

He showed me the painted pictures of God Vishwakarma and Hanuman that he did. There was also a hand painted clock hanging on the wall.







Conclusion

The community at Sankheda that surrounds the craft seemed optimistic about it on the outside. However, an undertone of apprehension whether their future generations would work to keep the craft alive lingered in every exchange.

After having recorded my interactions with these craftsmen and having observed the organisation of the supply-chain for the craft, I thought a more formal system of organisation of artisans would benefit the craft and keep alive the spirit of community amongst them. Like the artisans themselves have recognised, their future generations cannot compromise on their education. Any intervention and innovation in business would require an educated mind. It also seems very important for the older generations to take interest in keeping the youth involved in the craft by not alienating them by being obstinate about practices in the craft and allowing them space to innovate.

Traditional crafts are typically considered antithetical to modern tastes due to disparate efforts to in promoting the image of crafts and building consumer appreciation of the cultural identity associated with them. Many contemporary, domestic and international markets remain inaccessible to artisans who remain limited to local markets due to supply-chain inefficiencies.

Some formal systems of organisation for artisans like Mutually- Aided Cooperative (MACs), Producer Companies or Private Limited Companies can be formed to enable primary producers to participate in ownership and contribute equity. These craftsmen have not realised the advantages of being organised into the above forms due to the widespread lack of awareness among artisan communities that continue to work independently.

These artisans also have no access to inputs from consumers for their designs to evolve in contrast to traditional societies where artisans were aware of the socio-cultural context of the consumers.

The State and Central government considering this a sunset industry views it as being no longer relevant in this technology driven economy.

Design institutions need to take an upper hand in sensitising consumers about crafts and in empowering craftsmen to innovate in their field. Traditional craftsmen can also be hired as faculty in design schools to provide job opportunities to craftsmen. This can also provide the resources towards research and development of their designs. Design philosophies endorsed by schools in India strictly based on western philosophies like Bauhaus or Ulm prove a hindrance in the path of traditional crafts being taken seriously. Avante-garde philosophies can be modeled by design communities in the country to bring crafts into mainstream contemporary markets and empower rural communities.

The global market for handicrafts is \$400 billion with India's share below 2%, representing a tremendous growth opportunity. They are India's global comparative advantage. The historically imbibed plural aesthetics of Indian handicrafts are priceless economic and cultural assets of the country.

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