

Handicrafts for Sustainable Livelihoods: Insights from *Saccharum munja* Artisanal Products Produced in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

Kapil Dev¹, Bhatt K.N^{2*}

¹G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad Central University, Prayagraj, India; ²Professor of Economics, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad Central University, Prayagraj, India.

INTRODUCTION

Handicrafts have been recognized as the single largest rural employment providing sector after agriculture in many developing and underdeveloped regions of the world. These products are unique expressions of a particular culture or community through local craftsmanship and materials [1]. The artisanal products are produced by artisans either completely by hand or with the help of hand-tools or even mechanical means as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of finished product [2,3]. The Process of 'de-industrialization' and the consequent transformation of India into an agricultural hinterland of an industrially developed foreign country proceeded almost simultaneously with the fructification of the Industrial revolution in Great Britain and her development into an 'Industrial workshop of the world' [4]. This had led to the decline of many indigenous handicrafts and craftsmen in the country. Still, the Handicrafts industry of India essentially mirrors the aspects of the age old civilization of the country. No wonder the phrase 'unity in diversity' is so applicable in India. Each state of the country has its unique handicraft products to demonstrate the diverse nature of Indian handicraft industry. It is a high employment intensive sector, employing over 6 million part and full time artisans, including women and a large section of population belonging to the weaker strata of society. The term 'handicraft' encompasses a wide range of artifacts.

Uttar Pradesh has a tradition of making baskets for everyday uses and for special occasions by coiling the outer layers of the grass called moonj. Moonj (biological name- *Saccharum munja*), is a perennial wild-grass. It is used as a raw material for thatching roofs, making baskets and other useful and decorative eco-friendly items. Naini-Mahewa area of Allahabad (now, Prayagraj) in Uttar Pradesh is known for its moonj crafts [5]. This grass grows near the banks of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna around Allahabad. Moonj is the outer-layer of the grass which is peeled and knotted.

Socioeconomic Status of Artisans Engaged in Making Moonjcrafts

Different Moonjcrafts items like *Daliya*, *Basket*, *moonj-Bag* etc. are produced across the Uttar Pradesh State. In Naini-Mahewa are of Allahabad district around 130-150 families are mainly engaged in making of different products from Moonj and Kaasa.

Here, the majority of artisans engaged in creation of Moonj-craft are women. Most of their families do not have any other productive assets except the land on which their houses are built. Men, in addition to their involvement in marketing of Moonj-products, also work in clothing shops of the city, drivers, peons or similar petty jobs in their free time. Educational attainments of both men and women are very low, but women are highly skilled in their Moonj-craft which makes them unique around the state.

Two social aspects are very important in relation to the Moonj making art of these women. First, when a girl gets married in a family, she goes to her in-laws with her skill and knowledge of making craft. Let it be at small level, she continues to make these crafts in her In-laws home. Secondly, when a boy gets married here, the elderly women of the family teach the new daughter-in-law to make Moonj-craft. In their spare time, they also help others in making of this craft. In this way the art of making these beautiful products pass from generation to generations.

Making Process

The making of moonj-craft is a highly time consuming task. The traditional coil technique is used to coil the moonj for making different crafts. The making process starts with drying the grass. Both Moonj and Kaasa grass are dried under the sunlight for 2 to 3 days. Then the dried grass is converted into small knots which are locally known as 'balla'. To ensure flexibility in coiling the 'balla' is soaked in cold water for some time. Grass kaasa is used as inside stuffing wherein Moonj is utilized to wrap around kaasa grass to make coil. Different patterns are created on the craft by using colored grass during coiling [6].

Correspondence to: K.N. Bhatt, Professor of Economics, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad Central University, Prayagraj, 400029, Uttar Pradesh, India, E-mail: knbhatt1@rediffmail.com

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The manufacturing processes of Moonj-crafts involve simple and traditional technique which is done skillfully by using natural grass and locally made tools. The Raw-materials needed in making Moonj-crafts are: 1. Moonj and Kaasa 2. *Kaccha rang* (color) to make the grass colorful. 3. Edible salt to add with the dye solution.

Similarly, the tools important in making Moonj-crafts include

- 1) Scissors (*Kainchi*) to cut the grass
- 2) A needle with wooden handle (*Sirahi*)
- 3) Plastic tub to soak the Moonj grass
- 4) Aluminum container which is used in dying process to boil the color solution

Marketing, Raw Materials and Credit

In the absence of formal marketing channel, both, 'Moonj-crafts' and 'Moonj-craft makers' are facing the situation of comparative disadvantage. Information sought through personal interviews with the artisans revealed that the present state and channel of marketing and selling of Moonj products needs institutional support structures. Since the work of making craft is done solely by women, it became responsibility of the men to sell these products. This Moonjcraft making has been going on for in the area for the past 60 to 70 years. Most of the traders in markets of the city who understand the potential and usefulness of these crafts, purchase these crafts in bulk at cheap rates. During Weddings times and festivals season, these traders also place advance orders for Moonj-crafts. Other than these traders of city, there are some traders of Delhi, Varansi, and Lucknow who also occasionally purchase Moonj-crafts in the supply demand chain for selling to final consumers with suitable profit margins. However, the poor producers at times even fail to recover their production cost. Under these circumstances of lack of appropriate marketing channels, Moonj-craft makers are not able to find true recognition of their skill and proper livelihood support from their products.

Majority of the women artisans stated that this work is no longer beneficial. Some of the women artisans forced to search for alternative jobs to sustain their livelihoods like sewing, embroidery at home to earn and even daily wage work. The lack of institutionalized channel of marketing increases the sensitivity and vulnerability of the women artisans, while the clever traders try to make their profit by creating surplus-value. This art may be saved from disappearing by assigning actual recognition to the Moonjcrafts, branding, advertisement and creating demand for these products.

Similarly, raw-materials are fundamental to any production activity, especially when there exists a mis-match in its supply and demand. 'Moonj' and 'Kaasa' are important raw-materials in making Moonj products. The Moonj grass grows only once in a year in October around the banks of Ganga and Yamuna rivers, that creates a big problem of raw-material as remains supply oriented. Moonj (Balla) is not available throughout the year. Due to the uncertainty of market demand and traders' orders, Moonj-craft makers are not able to maintain sufficient stock of raw-material. And when they get order from any trader, they had to pay higher price for the 'Balla'(raw-material) that further increases the cost of making craft and reduces profit.

Credit availability is another important aspect in productivity. It makes the producer (maker) able to purchase necessary raw-materials, in maintaining the stock of the products as some of the

production processes need very much time. In case of small craft like Moonj-craft credit becomes more important as the makers have no other means of financing except bank credit. Lack of availability and access to bank credit makes these artisans more vulnerable and their production (making) process more uncertain.

Personal interviews with Moonj-Craft makers revealed that whenever they apply for bank credit their application is cancelled. In such situation when they get any big order for their products, they cannot buy raw-material in view of the financial constraints. As a result, there are delays in completing the order, and sometime they are forced to cancel the order. In both cases, lack of bank credit adversely affects the livelihood of the artisan households.

Thus, the problems of marketing, raw-material and lack of institutionalized credit are the biggest constraints for the sustainability of the Moonj-craft in Allahabad.

Initiatives by the State Government

In 2018, Government of Uttar Pradesh launched 'One District One Product' (ODOP) scheme that aims to encourage such indigenous and specialized products [7]. Under this scheme, one product from every district out of a total of 75 districts in the state have been identified to promote their production and make them able to enter in national and international markets (ODOP booklet 2019). Many of these products are Geographical Indication (GI) tagged which means they are certified as being specific to that region in Uttar Pradesh. Many of these handicrafts created by various socioeconomic communities from the state at present are at the verge of dying which are being revived through modernization by the state government including Moonj-craft and moonj basketry [8] of Allahabad.

The main objectives of ODOP scheme are:

- Preservation and development of local crafts/skills and promotion of the art.
- Increase in the incomes and local employment (resulting in decline in out-migration for employment).
- Improvement in product quality and skill development.
- Transforming the products in an artistic way-through packaging, branding etc.
- To connect the production with tourism.
- To resolve the issues of economic differences and regional imbalance.
- To take the concept of ODOP to national and international level after successful implementation at the state level.

Government of Uttar Pradesh has also started many schemes under ODOP for branding, skill development, marketing which include: Marketing Development Assistance Scheme; Finance Assistance Scheme; Skill Development Scheme; Common Facility Centre (CFC) Scheme, etc [7].

CONCLUSION

Handicraft industry of India represents the old age civilization of the sub-continent. Moonj-craft of Uttar Pradesh in Allahabad (presently renamed as Paryagraj) is one of the traditional handicrafts. It is a labor-intensive practice that provides livelihood and employment opportunities to many households who are constantly engaged in this work for past several generations. Due

to rapid globalization, preferences of the people and shrinking demand for these products have posed serious threat to the livelihood of the moonj-craft makers. There is immediate need of creating demand for these Handicraft products through proper sales and promotion activities [9]. Uttar Pradesh State government has started One District One Product scheme to assist and develop one selected product from each of its 75 districts through branding, financing, skill-development and marketing. Moonjcraft has been selected from Allahabad under this scheme. Despite these incentives under ODOP scheme, the Moonj-craft makers are still facing the problems of bank credit, marketing and low demand for their products. An effective implementation of ODOP scheme is very crucial to save the livelihood of the economically vulnerable artisans and generate employment opportunities in such labor-intensive traditional handicraft sector. This will give recognition to the makers of these products and save similar indigenous and age-old handicrafts traditions.

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