Chapter 17
Innovation and Craft Revival: Empowerment and Sustainable Livelihoods

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ABSTRACT
Protecting and preserving the knowledge and skills of traditional crafts is a growing challenge. Further, ensuring a sustainable livelihood to artisans working in these traditional crafts is a tall order. Section one of the chapter explores the traditional tribal art form widely practised among a semi-nomadic tribe in the north-west region of India. Section two of the chapter examines the role of a not-for-profit organization involved in the revival of the ancient Lambani craft. Sabala- an organization located in one of the districts in Southern India has been working on the revival and preservation of Lambani embroidery. At Sabala, crafts are designed to enhance the creative appeal of products for the local and global market, as well. The integration of both, the creative design and the execution of craft in the hands of the artisans can ensure ingenuity in the craft form and not reduce the craft worker to a mere labourer.

INTRODUCTION
The handicrafts industry has shown tremendous potential for growth besides working towards poverty alleviation through a twofold objective of employment generation and export promotion. Handicrafts are a source of livelihood to a large number of poor people in India and especially the rural poor. The handicrafts sector is a source of supplementary income for seasonal agricultural workers, who have limited alternative employment opportunities in the rural area. To a certain extent, it helps curb migration of workers from rural to urban areas in search of better employment. The sector often provides part–time employment to rural women, who traditional practice the craft form. Often illiterate and belonging to caste groups of low social status, these artisans, especially women, are well-versed in the traditional knowledge and skill of the craft practiced for generations. Protecting and preserving this knowledge and these skills is a big challenge, and ensuring a sustainable livelihood for these artisans is a tall order. But the artisans still live in abject poverty due to exploitation by the middlemen and dealers who pay the artisans only a fraction of the price earned for their products. It is difficult for these artisans to make an

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Innovation and Craft Revival

assessment of the value of their products in the market and then to find a market for the products. The crafts sector is therefore classified as an unorganized sector with no well-defined policies to govern. Empowering women through the development of the handicraft sector to benefit themselves and their families and develop in a sustainable manner is the need of the hour. Another good reason to promote the sector is the inherent nature of the craft activities- simple, inexpensive and environmentally friendly. The handicraft sector is known for making use of natural resources and the inherent skills of the artisan to create exquisite hand crafted products. The craft sector comes out as one of the most viable alternatives to create and sustain employment opportunities for millions of rural artisans by not only generating a livelihood, but by liberating and educating the artisans, as well. It also aptly serves the objective of reviving and preserving some of the languishing crafts and ensuring that the knowledge is passed on to the future generations.

BRIEF HISTORY OF INDIAN HANDICRAFTS

The history of Indian crafts dates back almost 5000 years. Archaeologists have found Indian crafts in the remnants of Indus Valley Civilization (3000 B.C.-1700 B.C.). Beginning its journey in ancient times, the craft tradition in India has witnessed a sustained evolution. Historically, Indian handicrafts were basically made for day-to-day use. Indian crafts have been highly acclaimed throughout the world for their aesthetic appeal and magnificence and became an important commodity for world trade. The Mughal era witnessed the patronage of brilliant artisans and craftsmen endowed with excellent skills and, as a result, Mughal carpets, ivory bone horns carvings and papier-mâché were regularly exported from India to other countries. Skilled artisans were invited from all over the globe, and, with them, came the native art forms that touched upon and left a mark of their own on Indian craft forms. The disintegration of the Mughal Empire led to the rapid decline of the craft industry; with the coming of the British East India Company and its engagement in trade relations with India, the Indian markets were flooded with machine made products. It was difficult to compete with the finesse and the quality of the machine made products. Gradually, the Indian crafts started losing their charm and were discontinued. Much later, during the days of the freedom struggle, the Gandhian philosophy of self-sufficiency and the Swadeshi movement once again led to the revival of Indian crafts.

Each state of India has its own tradition and legacy of handicrafts. As one moves from the north to south and east to the west, one witnesses the varied craft-forms ranging from pottery, metal craft, woodcraft, stone works, gems and jewelry, textiles, leatherwork to mesmerizing paintings, sculptures and statues. India has perfected almost all the arts and crafts forms known to humanity. To mention a few, there is the fragile beauty of the Phulkari art of North India or the dizzying artistry of the silver filigree work famous in eastern India; the colossal impact of stone craft of South India and the artistry of bidriware from western India- all demonstrate the elegance and brilliance of Indian art and craft.

Craft Revival and Preservation in India

The handicrafts sector in India is highly disorganized; the lack of effective policies on the part of the government exacerbates the situation. Despite being the second largest employer in the country after agriculture, the government has failed to lay down well defined policies in the interest of the artisans/craft workers. This has posed major threats to the livelihood of artisans and has put the sector in a vul-