

Introduction to the Handicraft Subsectors of Nepal

KIRAN DUTTA UPADHYAY*

INTRODUCTION

This article is a preliminary observation on some of the important handicraft activities in Nepal and will be followed by intensive papers which are the result of research in which the author was involved. The research study aims to evaluate the contribution made by the handicraft sector to the national economy, identify both the problems faced by the sector and the potential for development in the sector. The present article is a report based on several field visits made by the author to different parts of the country focusing on the general production procedures of the items and also the problem envisioned in the sector.

Handicraft industry in the past, played a major role in meeting the day-to-day demand of manufactured output in Nepal as elsewhere in socio-cultural norms and values were embodied and preserved. Traditionally, local riches, temples and religious attitudes and beliefs and closeness in the economy helped evolve and promote the handicraft sector. Opening the economy, particularly to the vast Indian market, and a gradual deterioration of religious attitudes brought slackness in the sector. Yet, as a large part of the economy is still non-monetized and self contained, most household goods in rural communities still are self-produced for domestic use or for local barter. The evolution of what may be termed a market in many areas was caused by the availability of machine made products, which are cheap owing to scale of production and technical advancement. Dependence on the market stopped of self or local production. Time series scenario of existence and extinction of handicraft products can be observed in Nepal in the Terai (plain) where there has been a complete takeover by machine-made items, where handicrafts existed before and in the hills and mountains which are still isolated and inaccessible and where self or local hand made items are the basic sources of material supply.

With the opening of the national economy to external markets in the last two decades a new source of handicraft demand which is tourist and export demand has been created. Expansion of the public sector and a reorientation of the private sector towards artistic hand-made items also have recently emerged as important sources of demand for handicraft products. Revival of metal, wood and also woolen handicraft products in the Kathmandu valley is the result of these new sources of crafts demand.

**Mr. Upadhyay is Lecturer in Sociology at Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur.*

This article is an abridged version of the research work carried out by the author between 1983-86, sponsored by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada.

In 1982/83 Nepal exported handicraft items to overseas of value NRs 147 million which is about fourteen percent of total export earnings. In 1974/75 the share of earnings from handicrafts was only four percent.

For the last decade or so public sector support for the development of handicrafts also has been intensified to protect the artistic and cultural output production, to earn more foreign currency through export of such items, and to generate employment at the rural level. Accessibility to public support, however, is strongly correlated with the remoteness of the location; relatively accessible areas have been able to benefit from public support, and hence handicraft production activities have increased and have become market oriented. But handicrafts in remote areas are being sustained on their own and the crafts limited to the production of utility items for local use. The same treatment of the handicraft sector and cottage and small scale industries at large from the public sector, it seems, has discriminated against the handicraft sector, as it is by and large unorganised and hidden.

What is Nepal, what its economy looks like, where Handicraft Sector stands ? Unemployment VS handicraft.

Nepal is one of the poorest Himalayan kingdom of the world. Stretched east to west, except a narrow strip in south more than three fourth of its total area (149,000 square kilometer) is covered by hills and mountains. The northern area is composed of self sufficient ecological regions and pockets which lack transportation link and hence have remained traditional, and closed.

Agriculture and livestock are the major source of livelihood to the people and two third of total GDP is generated from these sectors. Manufacturing sector is tiny, accounting only about two percent of national GDP. Household based cottage and handicraft units account for more than one third of the income generated from manufacturing sector. Accurate statistics on number of cottage and handicraft units is not available in Nepal. An estimate reported in Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-1985) puts the total number to be seven hundred thousand. In a small country with sixteen million population and about three million households, the number indicates that every fourth household in the kingdom are engaged in cottage level manufacturing activities. More than one million workforce are fully or partially engaged in this sector, making cottage and handicraft industry as the second largest sector in terms of employment. However, as these manufacturing activities have remained largely informal, little is known about them and also that little is being done for them in Nepal.

In what follows is presented a glimpse of some of the important handicraft activities in Nepal. The research on handicraft sector covered all the described activities except the pottery. There are many more activities which are excluded here not because they are not important. The subsequent endeavours would be directed towards them.

Metal Crafts

Metal working is one of the traditional handicraft industries in Nepal. Kathmandu Valley, particularly Patan, is the main production centre, where socio-cultural value embodied items are produced basically for export. Annual average export value in Nepali metal items is Rs. 10 million (US \$ 0.6 million) which is fully accounted for by the products from Patan. Usable items including water containers and water pots and oil lamps are produced both within the valley and in several hill centers in Nepal. Field research was conducted in Patan as well as in Palpa, Bhojpur and Chainpur, the three important hill centers specializing in metal crafts. Production of such usable items is largely meant for local consumption.

The hills of Nepal are yet not monetized, and metal has remained one of the indicators of assets and social prestige. It is a principal item in the dowry (Daijo), hence symbolizing its value in terms of assets. In the Terai and in urban areas also where the process of modernization has begun, even water containers and other heavy metal utensils (Gagri, Khandakulo, Bata ...) accompany the new bride to her new house.

Except in a very few production units in the valley, the method of production is labour intensive using traditional tools and virtually unchanged technology. Only in the valley where a regular supply of electricity is available are electrical tools being substituted; in other places, hand driven tools are used and charcoal and firewood are the source of energy/power. Brass and bronze are the raw materials.

The production process is very rudimentary. It begins with making a Wax model of the desired items' shape. Wax is largely supplied from local hill and mountain communities. Piles of Wax are placed on a wood board and laid in the sun for an hour. They are then heated to become soft for molding. Spinning wheels are used to finish models. Details of the model, for smooth design, are added with the help of a hand driven wheeled machine. For decorated patterns, the model is hand-carved.

The model is then dripped into a thick dung liquid which is dried in the sun. The dripping is done three times. Afterwards three coats of soil and rice husk mixture are applied to the model. After each coat, the application is dried in the sun to ensure that the caste is then heated to remove the Wax model from the caste. The Wax obtained is reused again for modeling. About one third of such used Wax are reused.

Brass or bronze weighing about nine times the weight of the Wax model is melted and consequently connected to the caste by a husk/soil mixture. Charcoal heating is used and takes 2-3 hours for melting. The caste also is heated, otherwise the metal item will not be strong. The melted metal is poured into the caste with the help of tongs. The caste then is cooled for half an hour and then broken off, thus giving the desired item, which is again hardened by heating.

The prepared item is then filed. Excess metal stubs are filed off and joining areas are filed smooth and flat. Simple tools are used for filing. After filling, the cleaning process begins. Small ridges from filling are smoothed. Imperfect spots or holes in the item are filled by repairing metal. After cleaning (using simple tools) the items are hand cleaned with ash.

Except in a very few craft units in the valley, production is household-based. Items are made and produced entirely by units or households. Hired labor is paid largely on a daily basis. Pure entrepreneurs (not common) employ craft households for the whole function from Wax modelling to polished item. In such cases all the inputs are provided by the entrepreneur, and a service charge is paid on an item basis for small and artistic items and on a wright basis for large and usable items.

Irrespective of survey location, the metal craft work is caste specific. Only the Newars work on this craft. Kami, a caste which works with iron, is also taking up brass and bronze activity. Yet the artistic skill is concentrated among Sakya and Tamrakar castes in the Newar community.

Cotton

Handloom cotton weaving is the traditional source of cloth supply in Nepal. Traditionally cotton was grown even in the hills, and thread was prepared from cotton and forest products. Simple looms capable of producing material one to two feet wide were used to produce cloth for household use and sale in local markets. However, growing population pressure has found the conversion of cotton growing land into grain growing land. Also the penetration of cheap products from Indian mills made the traditional method of cloth production comparatively expensive. This led to the gradual death of the traditional source of raw materials and local cotton products.

In the 1920s, improved looms were introduced in Kathmandu Valley along with Gandhian Charkha. Training programmes were introduced with teachers from Bengal of India. Thread was imported from India. Looms gained popularity and loom-woven cotton Khadi also became available in the local market. The institutional demand for loom products in Kathmandu Valley (eg. prison uniform, government employees' dress) gave impetus to the cotton cloth producers. Production was concentrated in Kirtipur and Lubhu of the Valley. Yet for a long time loom operation has remained part time work, as the periphery of Kathmandu is agrarian.

Over-time looms have spread in the valley and elsewhere in the country. In the valley usable cotton products such as saris, shirts and bed spreads are the major products. The supply is consumed by local valley demand as well as demand from other parts of the country. Exportable ready-made garments are made from hand woven cloth. Palpa and Terhathum are noted production areas for artistic Dhaka clothe used for making national caps, shawls and shirts. In the Tehrathum area the traditional pattern of weaving prevails. Such weaving is done on outdoor

wood and bamboo treadle looms by Limbu and Rai women. The strips of mercerised sewing cotton with their intricate colourful stranded cotton patterns are used in Nepal for making caps, shawls, blouses, and waistbands. These mercerised materials are also exported.

Except in Kathmandu where powerlooms are also in use, handlooms and traditional outdoor wood and bamboo treadle looms are the tools used in the production process. Looms are made locally and cost about one thousand rupees for big looms used in the valley and two hundred rupees for treadle looms. The basic input is thread imported largely from India, and secondarily from Japan and China. Dyeing and colouring of cotton thread is done locally again using imported dyes and colours.

Production is organised largely on a household basis and in off-agricultural seasons. In the larger production units, labourers are paid in terms of length and breadth of the cloth. The piece wage payment system is sweeping all parts of the country wherever labour is employed. Except for warping and dyeing, other activities are performed by women at large. Job contracting is very common in the valley. Entrepreneurs supply all the inputs with the desired cloth design to the artisans households, which are paid in the basis of length of cloth. Dhaka weaving is unique and complicated. At every change of shed the weaver decides without chart or counting threads into which section of the warp one is going to lay the colours which form the patterns. Dhaka cloth fetches higher prices and labourers higher wages.

The product market is smooth for cotton loom products, and the problem is with inputs which are imported, but not regularly. Public support for import is not up to the demand. Private sector traders are also involved in inputs supply but again face bureaucratic obstacles through trade regulation.

Wool

Being a mountainous country, warm wool items are in high demand in the country of which the greater proportion is met by local products. Artistic woolen carpets are relatively recent products, skill and design being imported from Tibet. These carpets are largely meant for export.

Exportable raw wool sweaters, gloves, socks, jackets and shawls (Pashmina) are produced in Kathmandu, notably in Baudha and Swayambhu localities. Quality wool is required for these products and is brought from mountain regions of Nepal and Tibet. In other mountain and hilly centres woolen blankets and woolen jackets are produced for local consumption and are exported to urban centres of Nepal.

The production process of wool items starts from shaving the wool from live sheep and mountain goats. Raw wool and also sheep skins are imported from Tibet. The wool is then washed in the river or streams. This washed wool is then segregated according to the quality. Pashmina, the fine wool, is quality wool and is used to make fine woolen shawls.

The wool is then thoroughly mixed and thread is made out of it. With the thread, in the valley, items are made in wider handlooms. Outside the valley, outdoor wood and bamboo threadle looms are used to produce items of narrow width which are seamed together afterward with woolen thread. Colouring of wool is done using herbs available in the local forests.

Except in the Kathmandu Valley where production takes place on a relatively large scale, the household is the unit of woolen goods production. In Kathmandu, jobs are subcontracted, cleaning and thread spinning is done by separate artisans, and weaving by separate artisans. For the first type of job wages are paid on the basis of weight and the weavers' wage is paid on a length basis in the valley and elsewhere. Women are the main workers in the craft.

There has been no systematic public sector undertaking to facilitate raw wool trade in the kingdom. Sheep farming is being assisted as a part of livestock development program in the mountain regions of Nepal. The import of Tibetan wool and trading of local wool is done by private sector. As the public sector emphasis has been on exportable carpets, locally usable products is in decline.

Wood Carving

Wood carving is concentrated in Kathmandu Valley, especially in the Patan area. Traditionally carving was used to decorate temples, where a variety of artistic work can be seen surviving after several centuries. Artistic doors and windows in old houses also reveal that traditionally local demand for artistic carving existed. However, with the gradual changes in house designs and the virtual cessation of temple building, the carving industry dwindled from the dawn of the century. Wood carvers switched to in furniture and similar wood industries.

The opening of an export market in the last two decades has helped save dying wood carving industry. Miniatures of historically famous doors and windows (eg. peacock window, carved idols, and furniture) are the major items made presently, primarily for export purposes. Local demand excluding tourists accounts for very little of the total transactions. Tourist demand, however, accounts for about one fifth of the transactions.

Raw material used is hard or soft wood procured from both market and government run depots. Wood is brought from tropical forests in the Terai. Tools and equipment used in the craft are hand driven simple tools. Since very recently saw mills' produced logs are used as the input. Carving both rough and fine is done by hand.

A majority of households engaged in the craft are entrepreneur cum artisans. In Bhaktapur of the Valley, a wood cooperative was established some seven years ago, which is owned by the local artisans and under local government supervision. In fact, formation of the cooperative is

the result of a renovation project for local historical buildings. The artisans worked in the project, sharpened skills and after the project, formed the cooperative. One of the major reasons for the cooperative formation is access to the export market, approached through the project donor-Germany. Producers in Patan, however, manage the external market through a middleman, who collects the demand from external market.

Pottery

Making of water, grain and general containers from soil has remained a traditional activity all over Nepal since the beginning of civilization there. In rural areas still a majority of households depend upon soil to make the containers and other utensils required in day to day life. Besides utility items, god or goddess idols, masks and other utility items such as astrays, candle stands, etc, are also clay-soil products common in rural Nepal.

Pottery is generally concentrated in the valley and Terai (the plain) areas of Nepal, because of the availability of raw material clay soil in these areas. In the hills and mountains, hence, the use of pottery in day to day use is very limited and there such items are made of metal. Similar to many other crafts pottery is also very caste specific. In the Kathmandu Valley in Bhaktapur, of Newars and in the plain area Khumhal are the pottery castes. Variation in items produced in Bhaktapur and elsewhere in the kingdom is visible: in Bhaktapur production diversification has occurred owing to the vast and diversified demand from within the valley, but the Terai common utility items with traditional shape and design are made. As the bulky pottery items are fragile, production is dictated by local demand only.

Similar to many other rural production activities, pottery is also household based. Family members both male and female are involved in the activity. As the producers are of low economic status, raw material-soil is either collected from public land or is bought from local land-owners. Clay-soil made items are smoother and more durable, but clay soil land is relatively less suitable for crop production. More often than not, hence, to the benefit of both parties, clay-soil removal is cost free. Another important input for the activity is firewood or charcoal, which is used to burn the clay-items to make them hard and durable. The growing scarcity of wood has led to the use of crop by-products for fuel, which is bought from local farmers.

The pottery making process is very simple, it has probably not changed from its original state in the kingdom. Clay is obtained from rice fields or public places, and foreign material is sorted out. Clay and water are thoroughly mixed with the feet. In the ground where clay is kneaded little sand is sprinkled so the clay will not stick to the ground clay mixing goes in till clay limbs are not soft enough. This prepared raw material is then segregated into several lumps according to the conceived size of the final clay pot. The throwing method of pottery is universally used in the kingdom for all sorts of clay materials. The clay balls are put in the centre of the wheel (wood made)

in motion. While the wheel rotates, the potter gives design to the clay ball and produces things of desire. Usually small pots are made in one piece, but big pots like water containers or grain containers are made in parts and joined together later. Especially in Bhaktapur, large pots are made, and these are often enlarged by biting it while it is half dried. The enlarging process is delicate and is done generally by females.

Unfired pottery is first dried under the open sun and then put into kilns for firing. In the kiln, pots are put layer by layer, paddy or wheat straw being put in between the layer. Fire wood or coal is the main fuel used, supplemented by agricultural by-products, which contribute about 30-40 percent of the total fuel used. In Bhaktapur, especially, a community kiln is also in use, yet in general each participating household uses its own kiln for firing the row potter. In general 5-8 hours firing is required with a maximum temperature of 500-600°C. After firing, the pots are taken out and after cooling, the pottery is ready. Extra polishing and colouring is not common for traditional products.

PROBLEMS ENVISIONED

The scenario of this sub-sector is heart-pinching rather than gave. Because, almost all the artisans, who are in illiteracy, underemployed and in totality in poverty, are not in a position to improve their quality of lives. Moreover, the following are the major problems envisioned by the researcher in this sub-sector:

- education;
- wage;
- training;
- credit;
- raw materials;
- health, sanitation and hazards; and finally
- the Govt. policies.

Field observation supports that the majority of the artisans were illiterate. This may be one of the reasons why they were not in a position to acquire (explore) some of the Govt. programmes meant for them. Majority of the handicraft activities are household based. The mode of payment for the artisans were based on contract or piece basis. Under these circumstances, the wages were found very low. Even in such low wages, the artisans were at work. It may be due to the nature of handicraft activities, as it is their part-time and off-farm activities. However, they were aware of such low wages, but were helpless.

There are several institutions working for the upliftment of this sector. Several training programmes are going on for imparting the training to the artisans. It was learnt that majority of the artisans were working without having any formal training.

Even in these flux of change, majority were with their hereditary skill. Behind all these training aspects, there is a serious doubt on concerning authority, whether they are concerned with the fulfillment

of their targets ? Another lacuna may be with the selection process of trainees.

The field visit was concentrated among the household based unit, as it is the nature of HC industry in majority, very few household opined the necessity of credit. Because of easy accessibility they took loan from private moneylenders, in spite of heavy interest.

Majority of them were afraid of taking loans from financial institutions, because of its long and complicated formalities. Our artisans having less risk bearing capacity are reluctant to knock the door of financial institutions. Precisely, it may be done of the suitable reasons that they are in the lower social stratum and being illiterate are not in a position to get in touch with the financial institutions.

Field observation supports that raw materials are getting more difficult to obtain in proper time and in reasonable price. Most of handicraft activities are dependent on its import of raw materials. As the import is not regular, storage of the raw material does not seem adequate and is captured by limited persons, it is more difficult for the large number of artisans who even do not know from where it comes and where to be contacted for such raw materials. However, there are some public sector dealing with raw materials, most of them were found working for a few large entrepreneurs; because the majority of small scale entrepreneurs and artisans lacked awareness of all these concerning agencies.

Now-a-days from the Govt. sector, several programmes are going on for the upliftment of this sector. Field survey revealed that very few artisans know about these. It was observed that they are facing a lot of problems. They do not know how to over these problems.

They simply do not know where to go, and whom to contact for solution. They think their village is their world. Indeed, it is a task of great challenge for the concerning authorities to disseminate their programmes, which are meant for this group and finally to institutionalize these facilities among these groups.

Furthermore, researcher felt very embarrassing, when the health, sanitation and unhygienic working environment was observed. It was revealed that working in the craft is a source of getting disease for the artisans. Majority of the artisans advocated that they do not have any facilities against these unhygienic things. In this issue, particularly, working in woolen craft is the major unhygienic industry found so far because the very nature of its several steps starting from cleaning the wools to weaving cause workers to inhale wool dust.

However, researcher could not find the over-time, medical, apron ... facilities provided for the artisans. Engagement in the craft industry is obviously a part-time & seasonal work, but within these seasonality also it was observed that artisans could not get adequate work.

RECAPITULATION

During these days many considerable attention and high priority has been given to the rural poor, which supposedly reach down and out to these rural poor (artisans). There have been many scholastic meetings, discussions, seminars to pave the way to reach these rural poor artisans.

In spite of many sincere attempts, programmes are not schooling these poor adequately and their situations have not improved much. Rather the programmes have enlightened the elite groups by creating more inequality in rural structure. Hence, it is a more challenging task for those concerned who are working in this sector.

CONCLUSION

Handicraft sector has remained largely unorganised and rural activity in Nepal except in few production units in Kathmandu Valley are organized. Utility items are the dominant products produced in the sector. Artistic, handing and exportable items are made in Kathmandu Valley. Opening export market has revived and protected top skills in wood carving and metal structure in Kathmandu. Access to institutional and export markets is positively related to the preservation and development of handicrafts, while the invasion of cheap machine-made items is slowly eating up the sector. If protected and provided access to markets the sector can be a very important solution to the problem of underemployment in rural Nepal. Handicraft activities are, by and large, off-agricultural seasonal activities and hence policy emphasis should be to protect households as the unit of production. Wage employment wherever it exists is on a piece meal basis, because of the special skills required in handicrafts making. Another important reason for piece payment is the existing integration of handicraft activities with agricultural activities.

Infusing development in the handicraft sector is a difficult task as they are decentralized, but benefits are also very high again because handicrafts are decentralized, and hence greater mass of rural people can benefit from the development. Development of handicrafts sector can work towards preservation of Nepalese cultural and artistic patterns. As labour is cheap, access to export markets would greatly help the artisans and the country. The public sector can be of great assistance to the development of handicrafts if it can assist in facilitating inputs and promoting outputs to markets in rural communities where artistic skills are possessed by hundreds and thousands of men and women.