

Sustainable Livelihood and Artisan Women in Postcolonial India

Sucheta Sen Chaudhuri

Abstract

Handicrafts are manifestation of interconnectedness of environments and cultures; it is vast and deep in knowledge based on indigenous and traditional knowledge systems and provide base for sustainable development. This paper will discuss the policy of Indian nation state to protect rights of practice indigenous and traditional knowledge system with special reference to artisan women and work in independent India. It will deliberate the status of women relationship with means of productions by taking examples from socio-cultural situations. It will highlight interventions of government and non-government agencies and organizations and future necessities in this sector. The data will be discussed here both from primary and secondary sources. The primary data will be presented in the form of case studies.

Key words: *Handicrafts, artisan women, human rights, civil society and empowerment*

Introduction

India is a nation of handicrafts. The politics of classification of handicrafts divides gendered domain of cottage industries. Moreover, handicrafts of India received meager attention just after

Dr. Sucheta Sen Chaudhuri, Head, Center for Indigenous Culture Studies and Dean, School for the Study of Culture, Central University of Jharkhand, Ranchi, Jharkhand.

independence of the nation. Policies of development of new nation aimed at industrialization. Big industries drew entire attention of policymakers and government funds were allocated accordingly, through provisions of bank loans. Sustainable development related cottage industries received less priority, despite 'Khadi' grew as symbol of 'Swadeshi'/'Deshi' which included traditional handicrafts product. Handicrafts received attention as 'Art and Artistry' since colonial time. Such categorization as 'art' objects shadowed the long traditions of industries and not only divided producers between textile workers and artisans but gender blind policies made women producers as invisible (Sen Chaudhuri, 2012).

Handicrafts are manual and labour intensive and are manifestation of interconnectedness of environments and cultures; it is vast and deep in knowledge based on indigenous and traditional knowledge systems and provide base for sustainable development. The metal, wool, cotton, iron, coir, silk, lac, pottery, beads, vegetable colours extraction and block printing, paintings, stone and wood curving, applique, tie and die industry, embroidery, loom-loom and handloom weaving, basketry, paintings, handmade paper, masks, cane and wooden furniture making are only a few mentioned here among hundreds examples. The simple eco-friendly tools and techniques of handicrafts were considered pre-industrial in the era of modernization and industrialization (Sen Chaudhuri, 2001). Post independent policies of India distinguished this technology of handicrafts under cottage/small scale rural industries. After independence of India, this came under unorganized sector and received less budgetary allocation in comparison to big industries. But within decades traditional strength of artisans' products maximized profits and as a result the budgetary allocation increased in every five year planning. The tenth planning onwards the micro, small and medium industry (MSME) is perceived as more effective in terms of job-generation and investment-profit correlation (kindly see Khadi and Village Industries Corporation under the administrative control of the Ministry of Micro Small Medium Industries experiences of Andhra Pradesh in website). Of late handicraft is an example of sustainable economic pursuit with the facility of job generation in the objective of Micro Small Medium Industrial ventures of Government of India.

Development Commissioner of Handlooms and Handicrafts, Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, Khadi and Village Industry Corporations, and their sister organizations all these years since independence introduced many programmes for the development of the artisans. A good many non-governmental organizations were established who work with government agencies to support artisans. Government agencies always encouraged the artisans to create cooperatives, Self Help Groups, Registered organizations. Government financial facilities released to registered organizations of artisans. Central Government provided 'Artisan Credit card' or 'loan' facilities to establish manufacturing unit for group of artisans, similar facilities to beneficiary if not member of artisan group but have land for the establishment of the unit. The group who proceed to establish such units of handloom and handicraft units need to keep land ready for the establishment of workshop. That may be on the basis of hiring /lease. Caste/tribe/Other backward caste/women /Ex-Army men certificate is must for applying of loans.

Locating Women Artisans

Artisans or skilled manual workers use hands, tools, techniques, physical skill and energy to produce artifacts instead of machine or automatic devices. Weavers of both handloom and waist-loom are categorized separately as textile workers. In reality, waist-loom, pit loom are labour intensive tools but not machine. These are technologically simple and users friendly (Sen Chaudhuri 2012b). These eco-friendly tools do not fulfill definition of machine. Therefore, waist and pit loom weavers are artisans. Cottage industries of handloom textile is also labour intensive. Therefore, this paper will include waist and pit-loom workers within artisan. Government and non-governmental institutes maintain records of artisans and here a few are discussed. Women artisans of Jharkhand (www.census/2010/Jharkhand) and Tamilnadu (www.mae.in/pub/mono/pdf; Madras School of Economics- 2013) are 21.54 percent and 17.63 percent, respectively. In India's northeastern states weaving is women's job and basketry is men's. Huge potentiality of loom-weaving of the region and whole Himalayan belt is culturally constructed institutionalized behaviour. Traditionally these two production systems are gender specific and culturally important

tradition in all communities. Weaving was perceived as essential qualification for women and basketry for men. In modern time, weaved cloth are communities' identity markers. Commercialization of loom products since the independence of India was part of cottage industry. Government of India had facilitated threads in subsidized rates but the programme was unsuccessful due to meager supply of raw materials. Traditionally, those artisans were depended on local resources. Cotton is still produced in the jhum field (shifting hill cultivation) with essential crops for domestic consumption (Sen Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri, 2016). Wool reached to people through trade routes (Chaudhuri, 2012). Weaving was considered as essential qualification for every young women and the aesthetic sense of women were judged by the loom woven cloth by her. Therefore, women of every household are weavers. These products of women weavers were appreciated by Verrier Elwin (1975) as he commented that art and aesthetics of tangible productions of northeast India is revolutionary. Each women weaver of northeast India is skilled in traditional knowledge of loom and handloom weaving and qualified for the Artisan's card. Planning Commission and Craft Council of India 2009-10 located 16.83 lakh household of weavers and artisans and most of them are women (msde.gov.in/executive_summary/handloom_handicrafts.pdf). In reality census of skilled artisans in Indigenous traditional knowledge system is urgent in India.

Nearly thousand years back Kalhan wrote in *Rajtarangini* that the Kashmiri women use to weave at home and they used to supply essential garments for all family members while men used to go to *karkhana* (factory) for weaving carpets and quilts for purely trading purpose to long distance trade. Those productions were supplied to middle-east those days. During British period the word *karkhana* was synonymously used to identify 'factory' (the English word for workshop) and that was continued after independence. In northeast India women were traditionally engaged in weaving like women of Kashmir. Weaving traditions in southern, western, northern, and eastern India are caste based practices. Those Caste guilds were men's organizations attached to the temple organizations networks at many a places like Kanchipuram, Sambalpur, Baranasi, Maheswar, etc.

These men used to do production at family levels in which all family members assisted them. In this home spun textile traditions women work as assistants to men in the family production system. Therefore, locating artisan women in the textile industries of the plains of India is not so easy until or unless they work through labour organizations. Most of them work in the family based weaving units as assistant of men in caste based societies of India. Similarly, pottery traditions to a great extent are gender biased. Handmade pottery while is an occupation of women in Leh and Ladakh, in Assam and Manipur (tangible records available in IGRMS, Bhopal), wheel made pottery is occupation of men (Ibid). Wheel made pottery is mostly a caste based occupation in which women work as assistant in the family production system.

In northeast India food production system heavily relies upon women. Shifting hill cultivations and gathering are such areas which are based on the women labour. Therefore, women's contribution in those regions happened in the domestic production system whether those are related to food security or garment. Women are connected to markets and they do selling of their surplus productions. Loin-loom products were symbol of ascribed and achieved status traditionally to many tribal communities. Later those were identity markers for respective communities. The loin-loom productions of northeast India have high aesthetic appeal. They are culturally valued. Women artisans are well equipped in their traditional skill (Sen Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri, 2010, 2016).

Traditionally in iron smelters communities also, women assist men in collection of collecting iron ore, and other activities apart from participating in gathering and household jobs. In the month of December, a few artisans family reached to Jharkhand and they said that they are from Rajasthan. A few families were camping in the Brambe market where I met them. They were in traditional costume of Rajasthan and they were making iron implements from rot iron. Women of the group were beating iron plates by hammers to create certain shape while man of the family was holding the iron plate on fire. Women were selling products also. Sangha Mitra and Bacchan Kumar

(2004:103) mention that sixty six percent labourer found in Nepal's Carpet industry are women, who despite of their skill in that industry considered as unskilled labourer. India's carpet industry engages child labour to a great extent and women too (<http://www.google.co.in>) as assistant.

Gender sensitive artisans' census survey is required to locate women artisans of India. Definitions of 'artisan', 'assistants'/'labourer' to artisans, need to be re-conceptualized. Artisan works need to be conceptualized as activity of collectives. Family may be unit of that work organization. Government records of 'Artisans' (including assistants) needs to be gendered and age sensitive. Assistants of artisans are required to reveal in the Artisans identity cards. Tools of artisan men and women have to to be documented to reveal women artisans' contribution. Government agencies can monitor problem of child labourer in cooperatives, clusters, Self Help Groups and Village groups through Panchayat Raj Institutions to eradicate it.

Artisan Women's Relationship with Means and Modes of Production

While in the loom-weaving productions, women make all raw materials ready by self before weaving. In certain cases of loom-weaving usually women members of the family and friend circle help each other. Social customs of the respective communities of northeast India control production system to a great extent. There are many social taboo and negative sanctions which women had to follow for weaving, though they are producers of cloth for everybody at family level. In the commercial production of the carpet industry, preparation of raw materials and other works are done by persons other than men weaver (master). Men are carpet weavers. In handloom textile industry also works of preparing threads, setting thread on warp, tie and die, preparing colours, coloring threads are done by both men and women. Any family based artisan job is team work. In fact for any artisan work, women are indirectly related to raw materials (means) of production because other than loom-weaving in all cases, family head in the artisan family is considered as leader/master by funding

agency as well as state. In case there is requirement of land for the establishment of manufacturing unit, men are land provider as they inherit and women not. Therefore, either raw material required for weaving or land all were directly or indirectly under control of men. Women work as an artisan or assistant job in the family production system of artisans and contribute to parental family before marriage, husband's family after marriage. Boserup (1970) discussed that development disassociated women from their traditional work relations. Agarwal (1996) look at this issue slightly differently. While Boserup put her argument by telling that with industrialization and use of heavy machines women lost their work; Agarwal observes that women replace men to continue the work while men migrate. Women are found to use tools which were used by men for the same job. Patriarchal social systems promote ideas of social security of men and men are assigned upon the duty to look after the weak that is wife, dependent women, family members. This androcentric system does not allow establishing direct relationship of women with raw materials that is means of production. Therefore Agarwal argues that women are ploughing land may not be indicator of progress of society; rather they are filling up vacant positions of men to finish works.

Traditional norms and customary laws of most of the societies are patriarchal and under such systems women hardly inherit any title or possession. Women artisans usually inherit father's surname before marriage and husbands after marriage. They usually do not claim of the natural resources of parental villages after marriage or husband's village. Their new entitlement to access natural resources in the husband's village is through the lineage/clan of husband. The artisan women nowhere directly connected with natural resources which they procure as raw materials for artisan works. They are dependent on the parental family/lineage/clan before marriage and on the husbands after marriage. These subordinate roles of women artisan never allow them to create guild, despite they have in depth knowledge on artisans' work.

Existing structure of governance and coordination of Micro, Small and Medium industry is three tiers. Khadi and Village Industry Corporation(KVIC) at central level, state level KVIC at the level of

state artisans, and District level organizations. All these tiers are collaborating with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and banks to form clusters, cooperatives; Village based groups with the help of PRI. Except 'Self Help Group', all other organization as an extension of public (space) are male dominated. Moreover, as per norms of government man of a family unit is Head. Man as team leader is projected as artisan no other members and all other members in the family projected as unskilled labourer.

Quality Ensuring Vs Targets Achieving

Whole development approach is at the outset demands Artisans' production increase day by day. Industrialization always aims to meet higher targets of production by quantity. In contrast, qualities of handicrafts are depended on time tested production systems and related to natural resources. In particular, natural resources used in artisans' products in India till date is considered as unbeatable. Machine made products not yet able to reach the quality. Users of handmade products and indigenous producers frequently appreciate the quality of products, which have used natural resources. This has reference of the products of handspun cotton weaved in loin-loom. Experienced persons say that those handspun threads create a thick and soft cloth, which cannot be found in the machine made cloths even weavers use factory made yarn. This is shared by many weaver women of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Nagaland to me on different occasions. Not cotton, but raw materials which are region specific may be natural fibers, silk, endi, etc. the production of which closely related with climate. No less vital is simple and eco-friendly technologies, which are known to all users. Raw materials for making tools are also collected from the immediate environment. I had a brilliant experience, while working with the Wancho women and trying to understand life of women around loin-loom(2001-2003). Most important learning for me was indigenous women's scientific understanding. I was visiting a lady and requested her to show me her tool of spinning. She was loin-loom weaver who used to produce cloths for family members. She had misplaced the tool that I wanted to see. On third day she instantly created tool for spinning because she was unable to trace the original one. The spinning

tool consisted of two parts. One stick and one load at down side of the stick. She used an orange to create the load at the down side of the stick. She started spinning cotton in that by whirling it which surprised me! Next day she had given me one flat seed of an unknown tree and said that they usually insert that seed at the down side of a bamboo stick as a load of the spinning tool. The knowledge of artisan women needs to be acknowledged in systematic way.

International Networks of Multinational Companies and the Artisan Women

There were age old pre-colonial and colonial global trade networks for carpets, silk and cotton furnishings and garments, woolen, leather products, jewellery. Those networks traced the artisans of India in previous centuries. Kalhan's *Rajtarangini* (11th century) mentions separate contribution of men and women artisans of Kashmir. He clearly mentions that women produced for domestic consumption and men produced for the commercial purpose. Women productions were controlled in the community. During colonial time, the Indian hinterlands supplied raw materials beyond Indian peninsula, that trading activity of foreign traders disturbed the human and cultural resource relations at local levels. The European brands sold artisan products as 'art and craft' profited enormously that made indigenous artisans as labourer and assistant. Emergences of Indigenous people network through different civil and religious networks are twentieth century phenomenon. From the very beginning of trade relations, women artisans not ever received due share for their contributions. Their products are valued within community and at intercommunity levels but women were invisible labourers in the commercial ventures of the fashion designers and technologists at national and international levels. Fashion designers are using such artisans' products without acknowledgement. Most of the artisans' products in market sold without any signature and address of the artisan. Traders are enjoying absolute monopoly on the artisans' products by selling the concept

'ethnic'. Both customers and sellers are careless about the artisans behind the concept 'ethnic'.

The Road Map to Empowerment of Women Artisans

Patriarchal social structures control all resources, right to work as well as body and sexuality of women (Sen Chaudhuri, 2001). As a matter of fact such controlling mechanisms are hindrance and always restricted women's productions. To overcome such impediments women artisans, SHG networks may be one of the solutions. Motivational and awareness training of SHG members at regular intervals will make artisan women visible who are working as assistant and not acknowledged for their acquaintance. Action oriented research projects are need of the hour to document men and women artisans, who are practicing indigenous and traditional knowledge. That will create scope to identify cultural as well as geographical origin of knowledge. Because, Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge are rooted to specific culture and environment. In the regime of World Trade Organization, research documents on Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems of the artisans will be able to protect people's subsistence rights as well as Intellectual Property Rights and specifically of women'. Universities action oriented researches can accomplish documentation of Geographical Indicators. Academic institution needs to introduce 'Certification program' to artisans, who are practicing indigenous and traditional knowledge system. Prof. Debjani Roy, Retired from Center for Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge Systems, Indira Gandhi National Open University (New Delhi) experimented this idea through workshop and Certification programme for Ginger cultivators (a particular species part of the Khasi Indigenous Knowledge System with high medicinal value), This programme collaborated Bank, who provided both loan and Marketing facilities to the Certificate holders for that particular species of ginger production. But such examples are very few. Patenting of innovative cultural products is another safe guard of artisan women. Gender as a variable of enquiry and planning programmes must be there otherwise those documents will

be androcentric as before. Cataloguing of handicrafts as Geographical Indicators will further be able to ensure subsistence rights of Women Artisans. At last but not least Feminists and gender experts have to ensure the Gender budgeting and Gender auditing at levels of planning and executions. If all these steps fail to locate Artisan women's contribution to establish rights of them, the Nation will be a silent spectator of women artisans' migration to international market as unskilled labourer. The great loss will be the loss of humanity because with their migration, eco-friendly diversified indigenous, traditional knowledge and skills will be disconnected from the origin and disappear forever.

References

Agarwal, Bina. 1996. *Gender and Green Governance*, Oxford, India, 2010.

Boserup, Ester. 1970. *Women and Development*, Earthscan, London, 1970.

Elwin, Verrier. 1975. *Art of NEFA*, Pub. By Tribal Research Institute, Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar.

Mitra, Sangha and Bachhu Kumar. 2004. *Encyclopedia of Women of South Asia*, Volume 8, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, p-133.

Sen Chaudhuri, Sucheta. 2001. "Social Context of the Wancho Design: Towards An alternative Paradigm" in the *Journal of Anthropological Survey of India*. Special Volume on Creativity and Excellence Vol. 51(2:103-120)

Sen Chaudhuri, Sucheta and Sarit Kumar Chaudhuri. 2010. "Ethnic Group of Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India", in Jasleen Dhamija Ed. *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, Vol.4, Paris, pp.212-215

Sen Chaudhuri, Sucheta. 2012. "Indigenous Knowledge and the Right to Work for Development: A Gender Perspective", in Sarthak Sengupta Ed. *Indigenous Knowledge Tradition*, New Delhi, Gyan Publications

SenChaudhuri, Sucheta.2012. “Women Environment and Indigenous Culture” in Basabi Chakraborty Ed. *World of Women: Multiple Voices*, Kolkata: Urbee Publications, pp.397-410 (In Bengalee)

Sen Chaudhuri, Sucheta and Sarit Kumar Chaudhuri.2016. “Textile of Northeast India: Orality, Textuality and Beyond” in Jasleen Dhamija Ed. Special Volume of Five Thousand Years of Textile in India, *Varta*, Bi-annual Magazine, Kolkata, pp.88-108

Internet Sources

(www.census/2010/Jharkhand)

(www.mae.in/pub/mono/pdf; Madras School of Economics- 2013)

(msde.gov.in/executive_summary/handloom_handicrafts.pdf).

(<http://www.google.co.in>)