

Crafting an education for the educated

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IN the early 1980s when working for the development of the crafts of Gujarat through its corporation and emporium, Gurjari, I decided to spend a summer touring and staying in many towns and villages to identify, revive, design and develop a whole range of crafts for an urban clientele. Since my children had their summer holidays I felt it might be educative for them to travel with me to see a new world and understand what their mother did when she was away from home.

My seven-year-old daughter was armed with crayons and note books to occupy her during our travels. When we went to Hodka village in the little Rann of Kutch, we stayed with the Harijan families who excel in embroidery. Traditionally, every young girl here is taught to embroider at an age when city children learn to hold a pencil. They begin by learning the running stitch, progressing to the button hole stitch, and finally making small envelope-like bags as purses. By the time a young girl is ready for marriage, she has usually prepared a rich range of veils, skirts, *cholis*, quilts, door hangings, covers for cattle horns and many other embroidered treasures embellished with mirrors, shells, beads and tassels. This array of embellished textiles demonstrates the extent of her talent and gains her the respect she is due.

My daughter learned to embroider a five-petalled red flower from her young rural counterpart, and in turn taught her to draw a red flower and write her name with crayons on paper. It was a fascinating and spontaneous exchange of capabilities between two small girls. Yet, while young girls from cities learn to write the alphabet, then sentences and paragraphs, join the ranks of the literate and even learn to use the computer if employed in an office, the girl from the village who is a skilled embroiderer and can earn a reasonable amount every month from her output of work, remains illiterate and a statistic on the list of those who are unemployed. Such are the anomalies of our economic and educational system which has still not planned for the integration of hand skills and intellectual skills in a harmonious and mutually beneficial manner. In this context we may well ask whether any meeting points can be created for both these forms of learning so that they are treated with equal respect.

Most craftspersons today begin a self-introduction by apologising that they are illiterate and poor as if worth comes from education. My response is to insist that before we carry on further with the conversation, they should disabuse themselves from a self-deprecatory attitude since they are rich in talent and learned in their skills. If the embarrassment is because of a lack of formal education, we need to ask who is at fault.

The adult craftsperson begins to educate his child in the known family skill when he is quite young. He would like to send him to school but knows that after the child learns to read and write, economic and social situations make progress from the 7th class onwards

an uphill task. At the end, even this 'education' is of no use since the child develops an attitude that manual skills and caste-related occupations are below his dignity, even though 'jobs' for under-educated youth in white collar circumstances are hard to find and they have no hope of getting a secure job.

Most youth these days pursue low trades or services on meagre capital in insecure circumstances. The artisan-father's only option is to keep his son by his side, teaching him everything he knows about the family skill. If, somehow, the young craftsman completes his schooling to the higher secondary level and maintains his knowledge and interest in craft practice, a combination of luck and enlightenment can make him an educated and progressive crafts person who possesses the creativity to innovate, the security of having mastered a skill, and the market savvy to make his work economically viable.

Currently this has begun to happen to a small but heartening extent without any attention from the formal education system or policy planners. Jomalgudda Niranjan, a *kalamkari* artist from Andhra Pradesh, learned his traditional art from his father Guruppa Chetty and after finishing school not only took up the skill in right earnest but has managed to research old textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London to add to his knowledge and repertoire. Ismailbhai Khatri, a master block-maker and vegetable dye hand-block printer of *ajrakh* fabrics in Gujarat was a recipient of a doctorate from a university in the United Kingdom simply because of the impressive knowledge of his craft although his formal schooling was minimal. In both cases, learned but uneducated artisan fathers taught their sons all they knew, and the sons made the most of it with no particular help from the formal education system.

The IIMs and IITs, the polytechnics and medial colleges are all for a different section of society while the artisan classes, as others in the informal sector, are forced to survive by acquiring tools, raw materials and wisdom entirely on their own. One may argue that the *guru-shishya* tradition of master and apprentice is the traditional way for the craft sector. Indeed it is, but it also is a convenient way for society to absolve itself of the responsibility of providing a more rounded, contemporary education to craftspeople so that the traditional artisan is equipped with proper tools for survival in the modern world.

Just as the artisan is unlettered in the ways of the world, urban society and particularly its policy planners are clueless about the world of the artisan. Solutions are mismatched and the feeling of 'us' and 'them' between a rural artisan and a city person continues. For years some of us have been trying to introduce the crafts person into the consciousness of school-going children so that the culture of India as expressed through its arts and crafts become a part of the lives of city children.

The old programme of Socially Useful Productive Work (SUPW) in schools consisted of learning westernised embroidery, squash-making and other such mediocre subjects. If only children had been taught *chikan* embroidery from Lucknow, mirror work stitches from Kutch, *kantha* from Bengal, or *sujni* from Bihar, they would have learned about the

geography, history and social patterns of these states apart from appreciating the skills of living traditions in their own country. A syllabus constructed around these skills would have enriched the lives of urban children who are fed with meaningless television images from cartoons or films.

Learning has to be made fun. There is art, craft and mythology to be learned from our crafts people who have the inbuilt skill of handing down knowledge to younger generations. They also have religious and mythological tales, local stories about the environment or animals, traditional folk tales and other such information which has almost been lost to the urban mind. As such they are already teachers. Their skill and their knowledge has now to be channelled into innovative procedures and systems that can extricate us all from the typical bureaucratic stranglehold. Schemes to create time and space for artisans in schools that are part of the formal system fall by the wayside largely because the bureaucracy cannot 'slot' them into a category or grade by which they can be recognised and paid a salary commensurate with their status. Are they to be equated with Secondary Pass students, Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts or PhDs?

This question creates insurmountable obstacles and prevents highly 'recognised', awarded and skilled master craftsmen from standing shoulder to shoulder with teachers who are already part of the system with their B.Eds and the like. Perhaps it is time to give more value and care to the presentation of national awards to crafts people by conducting a more thorough check of their abilities, skills, credentials and capacity to be teachers so that the award is not merely a notch in the belt but comes with expectations of continued quality and the ability to contribute to society using that knowledge. National awardees and *guru-shishya parampara* awardees could then be formally equated with Master of Arts or PhDs.

While all this is still in the realm of wishful thinking, the Dastkari Haat Samiti has tried to bring the crafts person/artist into a wider world through the medium of story writing and illustrations aimed at city children in both India and abroad. It began with a small project in collaboration with the National Book Trust. Traditional artists were selected in Warli, Madhubani, Tanjore, Gondi, Phad and Kashmiri styles of painting. The NBT commissioned a selection of stories by writers from India and abroad. These were recounted to the artists. After discussions with in-house designers, illustrations were created to suit the stories and the books published by NBT. Most of the artists had never imagined it possible that their art could be used in this manner and for the unlettered among them it was an emotional moment to hold a book in which they featured.

The second project in creating greater respect for the artisan community and to find ways of bridging the gap between the city child and the crafts person's child was undertaken by the Dastkari Haat Samiti in collaboration with Unesco which had offered a small grant for development work. Instead of using it for a design programme benefiting a couple of dozen crafts people, I decided to create four stories specifically designed to educate a child from any part of the world about (i) rural India, (ii) an artisan family based on real

life situations, (iii) the magic and wonder of craftsmanship, and (iv) respecting people from different social and economic situations.

This resulted in a series called 'Magic in their Hands' by Puffin, the children's section of Penguin Publications (India) featuring a young girl in the bamboo territory of North East India titled *Bulli and the Tiger's Tale* written by Shalini Reys, a handicapped girl adept in chikan embroidery from Lucknow called *Mumtaz Embroiders her Dreams* written by Jolly Rohatgi, a young potter from any rural village called *Manu Mixes Clay and Sunshine*, and *Biju Spins some Magic* about a young weaver from Orissa written by Jaya Jaitly.

Each story covers the difficulties and joys faced by artisans as individuals or as families and communities. It contains humour, joy, magic, adventure and adheres to the value-systems followed by artisan communities. They would be of use to children everywhere as part of a syllabus to instil learning about cultural and social practices in different parts of the country and have been designed so that teachers can devise a series of questions and topics for class exercises from the text. Here too, traditional artists innovatively mould their skills to complement each text and illustrate them in their own special ways. Subtly, these books act as teaching aids and can be the start of a full range of resource material on the artisan sector which is today held back through caste and economic backwardness, starkly visible in their lack of education.

Literacy for the crafts community not only means the ability to read but, in the world of commerce, to sign vouchers, write out a bill, work out the cost and percentage of profit on a product, and understand the rules and regulations thrust at them from every government department with which they have to deal. Government departments that are constituted to handle crafts development or commerce and expect crafts people to 'value-add' and 'export' (favourite words these days), must first work hard to remove the dividing line between the literate and the non-literate.

All crafts people have immense pride in their craft. Literate crafts people have even tried to document their vast knowledge and create valuable material for any sensitive publisher. K.K. Kashyap of Bharatiya Vikas Manch has pages of motifs and stories of the Mithila painting tradition. Surendra Mehr, a national award winner in ikat weaving has put together a book on his art of weaving that would make any Indian, let alone anyone from Orissa, proud. Benudhar Mahapatra, an elderly, national award winning *patachitra* painter from Orissa who has trained scores of apprentices over the years, proudly carries around a voluminous and still incomplete manuscript of stories and fine sketches of *patachitra* art, which would be a treasure in any archive of the arts. Being subservient to the whims of bureaucracy, he has still not been considered worthy of receiving financial assistance under the guru-shishya scheme of the government.

This does not speak well of the government's ability to motivate genuine education and teaching as an initiative among crafts people. Such documentation as produced by these crafts persons/artists/weavers, if published, provides valuable material for the subsequent

generations of practitioners who have no recourse to printed materials in their metier even if they have learned to read and write. However, who will publish them? Will these wonderful labours of love be recognised by the cognoscenti? Who will realize the magnanimity of these traditional persons in so freely sharing the knowledge with coming generations? As much as crafts persons need to be 'educated' in the modern sense, there is much that can be learned from the so-called uneducated among them. The greater recognition of regional languages must also form an integral part of the urban learning process to counterbalance the growing idea that only a speaker of English is capable of erudition and thus worthy of respect.

Another body of work spanning a decade and conducted by the Dastkari Haat Samiti as a multi-purpose tool to benefit the craft and handmade textile sector was the Crafts Maps of India series covering all the states of the country. It set about documenting, through primary and secondary sources, existing craft practices, forms and products. The information was presented in the form of a friendly shopping or information guide for the traveller as it identified places of production, describing briefly the nature and range of the craft and its role in a socio-cultural context, wherever possible. Not only were tourists to be guided by the information, identified by mapping them across a certified map of the concerned state but the entire text was placed against the backdrop of specially created works of art by local, traditional artists.

This exercise enabled the presentation of over two dozen art forms of India, apart from all the information in fine print. While the limited purpose was to use them as shopping guides, and thus as a marketing tool, they soon developed into an educational one for young and old, Indian and foreigner alike. The UNDP used them to learn about the areas of crafts practice in Orissa and Gujarat after the cyclone and earthquake, when rehabilitation kits were required. The Ministry of Tourism has used them to coordinate craft clusters with areas of tourist interest which could enable tourism to bring customers to the artisans' home as a learning experience. Children put them up in schools as posters to learn about local cultures and crafts. Art lovers study the array of India's village arts, classical and contemporary arts and even floor decorations that flow from the artistic fingers of housewives. The attempt has also been to teach the traditional artist that there are innovative ways in which his art can be used and creativity has no end when put to a variety of uses.

Satya Narain Lal Karn, a highly skilled Mithila artist speaks passionately and repeatedly about education of both adults and children about the arts and crafts of India. He lives by his beliefs as the Director of the Art Department of the Bal Bhavan at Delhi and is a member of the Executive Body of the Dastkari Haat Samiti. He argues that even if we are only interested in trade and commerce and marketing is the only viable buzzword, the 'market', that is the clientele, must have an informed opinion about craft work and its products in order to appreciate and want to buy it. Everything is not about pleasing the market by imitating, cannibalizing and 'dumbing down' what has existed for centuries.

Sensitive buyers, designers and retailers have to be created to help craft livelihoods to survive. Satya Narain has suggested that the government should mould some of its schemes to direct funding towards educating children through workshops conducted by NGOs in schools. He has also been asked by many adults to conduct workshops where adults can learn a traditional craft in order to appreciate it. A composite package can be prepared by experienced master crafts persons in which history, the local culture, techniques, motifs and meanings of a particular craft are taught as short 10-day courses. These could benefit not just idle housewives but salespersons in emporia, lifestyle shops, students in design institutes, at polytechnics and others. Existing design institutes like the National School of Design, NIFT and the Indian Institute of Craft Design at Jaipur could open their doors more widely to senior crafts people by moulding some courses to be specifically taught under them.

Eventually, education is about providing and equalising opportunities for the widest section of society. When the artisan is proud to remain an artisan and yet can afford to send his children for higher education, confident in the knowledge that they will return to add value to their traditional knowledge, use the computer to e-market, speak English to communicate with foreign buyers and yet add creatively everyday to the vast body of knowledge which was handed down to him by his forefathers, the craft sector will have come into its own in every sense of the word. To enable them to do so with ease is the challenge facing those of us who consider ourselves well educated.