



a subtle thread

Gopika Nath, who works with craftsmen and also as one, writes that appreciation for the 'values' its practice upholds, that enrich our lives

TECHNOLOGY IS a rich gift of the extraordinary human mind. It has made our lives better in many ways, but it is equally capable of creating as many problems. Digital technologies and hand-crafting co-exist but as an indication of the sign of our times, the equation is tipped in favour of the technologies that make us more accessible to each other.

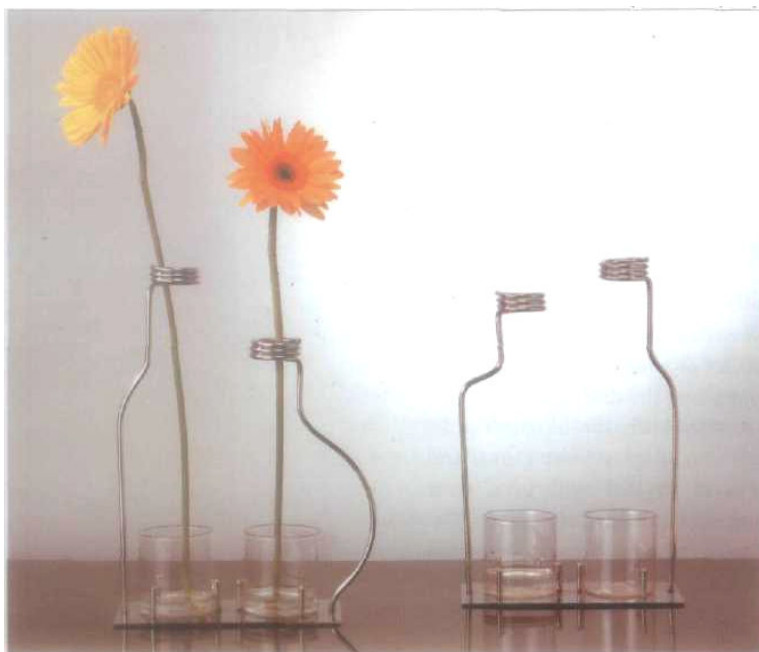
This rush to be there all the time, available for everyone or everything, flipping channels to watch two movies simultaneously, has created a culture

where those that pursue an activity that is time-consuming, laborious and painstaking are needless to say, marginalised. In addition this frenzy of information that we can expose ourselves to, however accessible it makes us to each other, does in many ways take us away from the essence of ourselves.

Today, the very idea of the painstaking work patiently undertaken by craftspeople needs to be reassessed and re-evaluated. Is it relevant to our lives? When we ourselves do so little with our hands, can we really ever learn to respect and value such work? History tells us that in ancient India, handcrafting was a way of life that nourished the man "*corpus anima et spiritus*". Ananda Coomaraswamy has told us that art as we know it in the modern world was alien to the precepts of art in ancient India, where the idea of self-expression and such indulgence which subjected the artist to suffering and poverty, because of the relative "uselessness" of their activity, was more "pitiable than heroic."

Ironically, the artist's 'pitiable heroism' has thrived and the craftsman's "functionalism" has been diminished. This is reflected in the realm of design as well, where in many parts of the world, quality is no longer about what the product does, but about what pleases the senses. The shop self has priority over human requirements and more often than not, human beings are surrounded

An Alex Davis line that speaks of simplicity



hand-crafting today needs greater aesthetically, culturally and spiritually

by things rather than by people.

This world is slowly encroaching on our minds. It is overtaking the sensibilities that gave birth to our beautiful handcrafting heritage. Even if we were not aware of the priceless value they held, hand-crafted goods were an integral part of our lives. Over the years, focus has been laid on the economic development of the rural and urban craftspersons rather than on perpetuating the sensibilities and sense of aesthetics that created the kind of museum pieces we all admire. Though necessary, this policy may not have taken into cognisance certain issues critical for the very existence of crafts in a digital era.

We live in an age that has made us, if not virtually incompetent to, then certainly reluctant to do any work with our hands, if we can help it. How many of us are able to handle little chores around the house without the help of a plumber, electrician or carpenter? How many of us choose to cook a meal, even if we have competent help? The issue here is not to debate how much we do with our hands and its merit, but how this reflects upon our attitude and frames its perception of the culture of hand-crafting that has been an inextricable part of this nation's heritage.

Working with our hands has far deeper significance than we can imagine. It has been said that "the culture of thinking requires a culture of hand as a subtle,



Craftswomen working with sabaii grass in Orissa

sensitive organ. If the hand can open up, if it doesn't just work, put plays as well, if it perceives, then the mind will open up more freely as well. The hand's plasticity is the plasticity of thought; the concept is what is conceived." When we do not look beyond the physicality of the hand to the workings of the mind attached to these hands, we miss the deeper cultural and aesthetic implication of the execution of a craft. Elaborating on this, M.P. Ranjan, faculty at NID cites the example of the 'first aircraft' which was built in sheds on the edge of Los

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Angeles, rather than in the laboratories of large-scale industry, because the "thought culture of large-scale industry would have been unsuitable for them, the experience upon which such industry built up its successes would have been too narrow a basis." {Me Ready) This epitomizes a necessary strategy for the survival of our inventive selves, where the laboratory is not an expensive 'Mecca' of machines driven by extraneous, man-made technologies, but by technology innately present in the inventive mind.

For Ranjan, this also signifies the kind of strategy we could think of for the evolution of the 'craftsman' beyond the present predicament of providing mere 'skill' to execute a 'designer's' product, "to becoming a designer in spirit and ability". Designing and crafting have always been cited as the dual role of a traditional craftsman and I do believe that a return to this is the only way that we can renew our cultural inheritance with any level of excellence that can be as mesmerizing as our history. But this is easier said than done.

Pooja Ratnakar, a young designer/entrepreneur, has an interesting perspective on this quest for excellence. She says that "there has always been the master craftsman producing the best of the pieces and the others, producing the so called run of the mill pieces using the craft skills passed onto them from their ancestors." She uses the example of Target and Pottery Barn stores to elucidate her point, where the two do and must co-exist. However, it is generally appreciated that craftsman do not get their due in terms of being paid what they deserve, for what they contribute towards the making of any product. This can only change if we are able to see work with the hand differently. Fundamentally, this can only be so, if we enter the realm of its practice and tabulate the process of this work in our own little 'laboratories' or minds. However, when we consider, the words of Mulk Raj Anand, "at this stage of man's development, when most human beings can manufacture shiny plastic goods, nylon fabrics, synthetic chemicals and even have computer art, it has become necessary to pose the question: whether people can survive, at any level of humanness or integrate themselves into wholeness, if that instinct of man, we have discovered as an organic instinct of man for creating something perfect with one's own hands, and with one's complete being, is considered necessary or not."

Working with my hands humbles me with a reminder of my human limitations. It allows me the time, space and dignity of pace to come to terms with being human and all that it entails. In addition, it gives me the capacity to retain some measure of emotional balance. If one looks at the way most of the craftsmen in this country live, they are far more conscious of factors such as

Embroidery worked with Kashmiri craftsmen



community and cleanliness than we in urban India care to be. Their lifestyle is frugal and spartan, their living quarters often double up as the workplace, where the kitchen could also be the dye room, but the spaces are demarcated in their own peculiar ways and what has always struck me is the level of cleanliness. The streets are usually made of mud, neatly swept. The streets are often used for the process of warping, but never carelessly cluttered. They make do with little. There is a great deal to be learnt from this, but our frenetic rush for materialism and its power has mesmerized us so much that we rarely see this.

People living in village India, in mud huts, sometimes without sanitation facilities and usually with far less facilities than the urban Indian has access to, are being expected to produce first rate goods at the cheapest prices to be sold to the rest of the world - a world that is completely alien to them. Is this not an impossible situation? They are the bearers of a precious legacy. Their economic development has determined the policies that bring us to this pass. Value for labour alone cannot ensure holistic economic upliftment. To redeem this, the professionally trained designer has been integrated into the business of hand-crafting. This may well be necessary at this juncture, but to my mind, it is only taking us farther from the return to crafting and designing as the dual role of the craftsman, that can imbue hand-crafting with the appropriate balance of aesthetics and skill, to nourish the body and soul of its practitioner, for its total sustenance.

Machines have perfected what the hand once made. Today, hand-made is a reminder of the imperfections innate in men. This can augur for greater tolerance and enhancement of spiritual values, but

the 'market' and its buyers imply that 'hand-crafted' is "misused as an excuse to compromise on the quality of standards that the craftspeople need to maintain", says an aghast Pooja who recently faced such comment. Is hand-crafting going against the tide of time? What lays in store for the countless crafts persons that depend on this for their livelihood is a very daunting question for they account for almost one fourth of the world's population. The answer is veiled in the warp of a time yet to come. A time, one hopes where the value and its practice need not be eroded for it to be revived.

In India, crafts are more than just a commodity. They are a reminder of a rich, colourful and aesthetic civilization. They also speak of the reach of this country in the kind of crafting traditions that spread from her shores. Crafts are significant in their 'material' contribution to this country's spirituality imbued with a pragmatic wisdom and understanding of human life, its needs and much more. They are not just a repository of the past, but also the seeds of the future. If technology is used appropriately, as and when needed without losing 'the touch' that makes us sensitive to materials, to others, ourselves and the world in general, if the more frugal, subtle, patient and quieter sensibility that frames the attitude and stance of those that prefer to work with their hands, is allowed to survive this frenzied world, however subtle, however softly they tread and speak, one can only hope that their wisdom will prevail. ❏



Vibhor Sogani's products—keeping the traditional idiom intact

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