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SUSTAINING CULTURAL HERITAGE : DERIVING THE CONTEMPORARY FROM THE IDIOM OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores ways to contemporize traditional crafts by adapting them for the modern context by proposing symbiotic craft-design relationships that can be helpful for development and sustainability of cultural crafts.

To research such synergies between craftsmen and designers, the authors worked with craftsmen to develop interior products. As part of a classroom project, design students collaborated with craftsmen to create new product concepts.

The study proposes that Craft–Design collaborations can result in products that combine the existing traditional aesthetic and hand-skills with innovative thinking. This alliance between craft and design can lead to a win-win situation for both sides.

Giving a new life to traditional practices/crafts will promote and sustain this cultural heritage and provide craftsmen with increased earnings, while ensuring that both Tangible and Intangible traditional skills are preserved for posterity, and the rich legacy of India's crafts can continue to be enjoyed and admired.

Key Words: Contemporary, Cultural Heritage, Design Intervention, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

With a background of the rich crafts heritage of India, this paper aims to explore ways and methods to contemporize traditional cultural crafts to adapt them to the context of modernity with application in interiors. The study proposes symbiotic craft-design relationships that can be useful for development and sustainability of cultural crafts.

Since a significant part of the Indian population is dependent on crafts for their livelihood, it becomes imperative to preserve and nurture these traditional crafts. Indigenous communities have traditionally created products primarily for their own consumption, and some may be set aside for trade and bartering, but barring a few, most traditional crafts today are stagnating and on the verge of dying out due to use of outdated designs that do not conform to modern day consumer demand as well as availability of cheaper products that are produced industrially.

As per the current trend predictions, Hand-made is becoming the Luxury brand of the future, especially in the realm of Interior design. Products that have a cultural value and uniqueness as compared to mass-produced goods are finding a growing niche market today, especially with all the current awareness of sustainability issues and interest in all things cultural.

The paper looks at ways to contemporize traditional crafts, and provide them a place in modern interiors, not merely as a decorative piece but also something that can be functional and still possess that link between the old and the new with an aim towards sustenance of our cultural traditions.

Due to the changing consumer preferences, dictated by cheaper mass-produced items, a large section of India's craftsmen population is losing their craft heritage, and many hand-skills have already vanished, and several more are on the verge of becoming extinct. This begs the question about the position of crafts today, the craftsmen and their traditional skills in the modern world. Therefore, it becomes imperative to create newer avenues for traditional crafts to spread and grow, to ensure their survival.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As part of the Primary research the authors have observed and understood how the designer and craftsmen collaboration works by looking at the traditional work of the craftsmen and the changes incorporated in their products after Design Intervention by Designers. The authors studied the work of a few Indian designers working in the field of contemporary application of traditional crafts. The authors also conducted research with organic wool derived from Gaddi sheep from the Chamba region of Himachal Pradesh, and have developed an innovative textile using this indigenous organic fiber and incorporating design interventions by exploring natural dyes and weaving techniques. The products and fabric developed through this intervention has been used by the authors for various purposes in Interiors. In addition to this, an explorative design exercise was given to students of an Interior Design programme, where the students first researched and then designed and finally produced Interior products by contemporizing a chosen craft, while working with traditional craftsmen. Secondary research included literature reviews to understand the current scenario of traditional crafts in India, and the benefits of design intervention for craftsmen and the crafts.

CRAFTS & THEIR STATUS TODAY

India is a land with a rich heritage of craft traditions and it is these traditions and associated knowledge and skills that form the cultural identity of her people. A sizeable chunk of India's rural populations subsists on crafts as a source of earning, with the crafts sector as the second largest unorganized sector in India. Based on literature reviews, the data suggests that there are around 7 million artisans in India (unofficial figures estimate 200 million), and these artisans form the non-farm rural economy (*Jena, P.K., 2010*).

Traditional crafts and hand-skills are a historical connection to the heritage and culture of a people. In the modern era, crafts have been seen as a product that is decorative and is objectified into something that is a reminder of ancient memories but craft is not just a product, it is a construct, a conglomerate of the tangible and intangible heritage of a people and their culture. According to Darlie O Koshy, Crafts are an important source and form the foundation for bringing innovations in modern design. Koshy likens Craft to a river that flows into design and carrying with it, culture and emotions (*Koshy, 2017*).

NEED FOR DESIGN INNOVATION AND POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

The global market for handicrafts is \$400 billion with India's share below 2%, representing a tremendous growth opportunity (*Kapoor, R, 2016*).

In such a situation, keeping our traditional cultures and crafts alive is very important as this is what constitutes our unique identity. The authors believe that for indigenous crafts to survive, changes in terms of design have to be introduced to suit the modern market and that there is a need to sustain these crafts, and their study focuses on how designers can collaborate with local craftsmen to come up with design ideas and products that help increase the economic value of traditional crafts. The symbiotic craft-design relationships can thus be useful for development and sustainability of cultural crafts.

To this end, organizations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Crafts Council (WCC), and Aid to Artisans (ATA) have been working to bring traditional crafts to the mainstream by involving designers to work with craftsmen to develop new products

Syeda Hameed, member of India's Planning Commission, has this to say for crafts: "If we are able to fuse contemporary styles with traditional crafts, if we are able to diversify our products and most importantly, if we are able to tap the tourist flow and urban markets, then the handicrafts sector could surge ahead. At the same time we have to ensure that we do not neglect our domestic market and above all the importance of our artisans." (Hameed, S, 2017).

NEED FOR DESIGN INTERVENTION

Design Intervention is a process that involves creating new products by re-designing existing ones by:

- Introducing modifications in functionality (whether utilitarian or decorative), colour, shape and size;
- Incorporating newer materials, techniques and processes (differing from those used traditionally);
- Adapting traditional crafts for modern consumer tastes, by marrying the traditional with the modern.

Design innovation stems from reuse of existing knowledge or reinterpreting existing knowledge in newer ways. (Pannozzo, 2007, p. 19) While the traditional craftsman has gained their traditional knowledge through hands-on experience with materials and techniques, as well as being born into that culture, and also handed down this knowledge from their forebears, the designer has been trained in modern approaches and process/techniques. The designer can learn from the traditional craftsmen and collaborate on design projects that bear the stamp of both the designer as well as the craftsman. This interaction will imbue the end product with more intrinsic value, and will set it apart as a unique creation, worthy of value.

By blurring the boundaries between Craft and Design, the designer and the craftsmen can thus work together by exchanging ideas, explore design problems and issues, and together identify areas for opportunities. With an ear to the ground so to speak, the designer can act as a mediator between craftsman and the market, and has a better understanding of the aesthetical and cultural needs of the customer. As per Laila Tyabji, the reason for declining crafts is a saturation of new ideas, and not any waning demand in the market. Any efforts for design and product development must stem from a partnership between craftsmen and designers (Tyabji, L, 2017).

The authors believe that sensitizing design students about the rich culture and heritage is important as they will be the future custodians of our culture. Bringing the culture of crafts in to design education curriculum will help the new generation to get connected with our rich cultural past, will help the students to think in new directions and will become a source for sustenance of our craft and culture before it becomes a thing of the past.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

The designers found that in both the cases – The Brands 'Beehive' by Pankaj Narain and 'Organic Connect' by Tanveen Ratti, the design intervention helped to improve the status of the both the crafts. Pankaj Narain adapted the comb crafts or Kangsi to develop innovative interior accessories and products.



[Fig 3.1] Traditional Craft Kangsi (Wooden Comb) and Interior Products Developed by Designer Pankaj Narain from Beehive using the Craft Technique and skill of making wooden carved combs

Similarly, the traditional craft of block making as practiced by Arshad Kafeel (A National Award winner craftsman) was studied. Arshad and his fellow skilled craftsmen from Pilakhuwa in Uttar Pradesh were not earning enough to sustain themselves as they were not making enough blocks due to introduction of screen printing technique in the industry. So the collaboration by Tanveen Ratti & Arshad Kafeel helped the designer and craftsmen to revive the craft and adapt the craft for development of products for contemporary usage. Now Arshad is also supplying his products to stores like Fab India and Kamala .

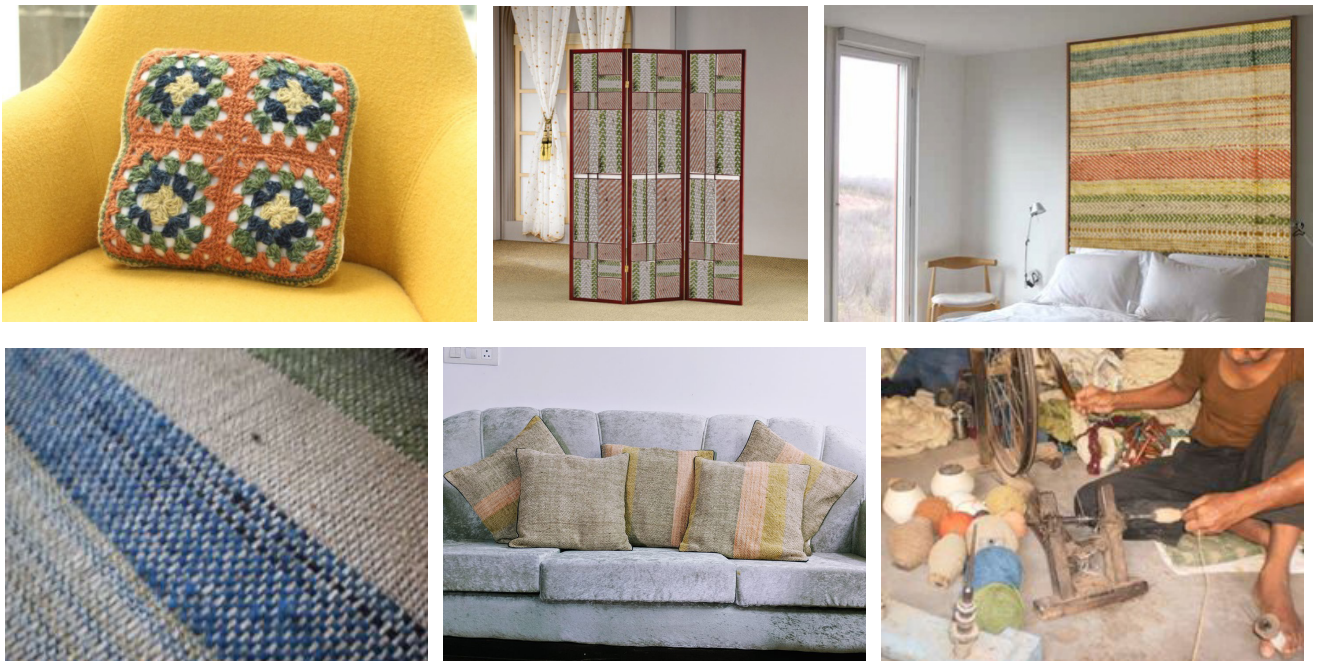


[Fig 3.2] Traditional Wood Carving Craft by Block Maker and Master Craftsmen Arshad Kafeel and Innovative Interior Products developed with Designer Tanveen Ratti from Organic Connect

DESIGN INTERVENTION BY AUTHORS

The authors have collaborated with Ms. Seema Singh, a textile designer colleague from the Fashion Design department at Pearl Academy. After researching about possibilities of using Gaddi wool from the Gaddi sheep, the authors have created interior products and textiles by experimenting with natural dyes and weaving techniques. Such experimentations were done in Chamba district, and newer weaves were incorporated in the traditional textile. Furthermore, Gaddi yarn was also taken to Bikaner where the local weavers wove textiles based on the authors' ideas. The Gaddi yarn was also combined with Kala cotton from Gujarat, and products were developed, and are also being marketed under the design label ARMOUR based on a sustainable model for circular economy.

[Fig 3.3] Traditional Craft of Gaddi Wool Weaving and Interior Products Developed



by Authors as part of Design Intervention at Chamba and Bikaner

ACADEMIC EXERCISE

As part of one of the subjects (craft for interiors) for the pg interior design & styling programme at pearl academy, a project was given to the students with the aim of engendering interaction between design students and craftsmen for design and product development for the contemporary interiors market.

The objectives of this project were: To encourage craftsmen to engage with Design in order to equip them with the skill and understanding that they would use and build on progressively; To create areas of shared opportunities for the designers and the craftsmen, within a collaborative process; To foster a two-way learning process along with the spirit of cooperation; To develop a sense of empathy in the students towards the act of creating/ making and the maker.

OUTCOME OF DESIGN INTERVENTION

Each student worked with a craftsman, studied the background of the craft chosen, the symbolism, stories, patterns, motifs and techniques, and then developed interior products that incorporated the traditional aspects of the craft with modern and contemporary function and aesthetics. This not only helped the students in terms of understanding how design intervention works, but the craftsmen also benefitted by getting new ideas for products. As part of an informal survey conducted by the students with their chosen craftsman, it was found that the new products thus developed, did have acceptance and value in the market. This collaboration developed more confidence in both the students and the craftsmen.



[Figure 3,4] Different Interior Products Developed as part of Design Project (Designer + Craftsmen) by Students of Pearl Academy

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The authors propose that integrating traditional crafts into contemporary society by providing them a wider audience in the main stream will help sustain the traditional crafts. The authors suggest that reinterpreting traditional crafts into contemporary forms can be helpful in preserving the unique cultural heritage of our country. Such measures will also provide better earning potential for the craftsmen and artisans practicing these languishing crafts.

By using the traditional craft skills in a contemporary context, the study proposes how the link of continuity between the past and the present can be maintained. The design intervention and collaborative efforts between the traditional craftsmen and the designer will generate new product ideas and add value to these crafts and skills by adapting and applying them to contemporary products for the present urban market. The study also reveals that such synergies can result in craft products that are a unique marriage of tradition and modernity, by combining the existing traditional aesthetic and hand-skills with innovative thinking, craft –design collaboration, thus contributing towards a sustainable future for traditional crafts and their practitioners. This will give a new lease of life to traditional crafts that are currently in the verge of being lost. Giving a new life to traditional practices and crafts will not only promote and sustain this cultural heritage but will also provide artisans with more earning potential, stable employment and sense of pride and will also prevent loss of skill. Hands-on experience of working in collaboration with traditional craftsmen can help design students gain more awareness about cultural heritage and the challenges faced by traditional craft skills, and help prepare them towards an increasingly modernizing world. Furthermore, the younger generation of designers will thus be better equipped to deal with the issues of sustainability and shall be able to forge sustainable futures for traditional crafts and craftsmen, while keeping alive the nation’s cultural heritage.

Such measures can ensure that the traditional skills, both tangible and intangible are preserved for posterity, and the rich legacy of India’s crafts can continue to be enjoyed and admired.

For any developing nation, innovations in indigenous crafts/products using traditional materials and indigenous processes are very crucial in order to achieve cumulative growth, both economically and socially. As contemporary societies are rapidly advancing towards the future, care should be taken to create ways to sustain the time-hallowed knowledge and skills that form the very foundation of a culture and give them their due respect. To translate a skill from one medium to another the original must remain, otherwise the translation will have no rhythm. Care should be taken that experimentation and exploration during the collaborative process between the craftsman and the designer must maintain the integrity of the traditional craft, and retain its identity, diluting its essence.

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