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‘SHKEN’ NATURALLY YOURS – SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINING RURAL DISTRIBUTED BAMBOO CRAFT ENTERPRISES OF NORTH EAST INDIA

Punekar Ravi Mokashi

Department of Design, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, mokashi@iitg.ac.in

Avinash Shende

School of Design, IDC, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, savinash@iitb.ac.in

Mandar Rane

School of Design, IDC, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, mrane@iitb.ac.in

ABSTRACT

The paper presents a model of a sustainable distributed model of a bamboo craft based enterprise through Design intervention. It is based on a human centric approach of wellbeing and economic growth of the local craft community of Syntein village in Meghalaya by a strategic intervention of design and development, production optimization and enterprise modeling of contemporary bamboo products that meet life style aspirations for urban users.

Decentralized and distributed centers of production of home-based enterprises are brought under a unique brand identity that tap into the potential of diverse craft and handloom traditions unique to the region.

The proposed model offers potential of expansion across other handicraft and handloom traditions that are reflected across India.

Key Words: Rural Enterprise, Sustainable Craft Development, Community Wellbeing

INTRODUCTION

As a country committed to sustainable development, the span of these two decades brings the development story of India at cross roads for reflection and reassessment. Vision paper 'India 2020' (1) outlined by Technology Information, Forecasting and Assessment Council – TIFAC, had envisioned policy frameworks that the government of India will aim to achieve the following goals viz. reducing the rural – urban divide; equitable distribution and access to energy and water; working of industry, agriculture and the service sector in symphony; access to education for all; making India an attractive destination for talented scholars, scientist and investors; access to health care for all; eradication of poverty and illiteracy; prosperity, security and good health for all through a path of sustainable growth.

At this stage, India has certainly drawn visible global attention in the steady development of its economy as seen in its Infrastructure development, industrial growth in Manufacturing, Information Technology and the Service sector. Urbanization has also increased and so with it a large middle class. However, these overall developments across geographical regions have been unevenly distributed. Will the development be economically, environmentally and socio-ethically sustainable is still open to debate? Sectors like Agriculture, the Small and Medium industries are in distress and are reflected in increased trend in unemployment and migration of people from rural areas to urban areas.

This paper attempts to focus on sustainable development of the handicraft sector in the northeastern regional (NER) states in India. The North East Region (NER) of India, relatively less industrially developed, covers the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The region is rich in natural resources. Forest cover in NER constitutes 65% of its geographical area as compared to the nation forest cover of 21% (FSI 2015). The region has a population of 45.5 million with a relatively low density of 174 individuals per km² (NECS 2015). NER has more than 200 tribes and tribal population constitutes about one fourth of the population. Around 82% of the population from the region lives in rural areas. This is higher than the country's average of 69%, which makes rural area a focus of development. NER lags behind the country on various development parameters especially in infrastructure, industrialization and employment opportunities (KPMG and FICCI 2015).

Considering that the entire northeastern region falls in the seismic zone V, earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters are recurring phenomena in the region. To combat climate change, bamboo is a core development resource that provides a wealth of practical solutions to reduce the negative effects that changing climate patterns have on millions of rural communities in the northeast. Overall NER has been free of any social sanctions, stigmas or taboos imposed on women. Women in the NER enjoy better status in the society as compared to the women in the rest of the country. Agriculture and the Small and Cottage Industries sector that include handicrafts drive its economic activities.

In such a scenario, this paper looks at distributed economic model as a possible case for sustainable development of the handicraft sector engaged by a large section of skilled artisan communities in Northeastern region of India.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Sustainable development (SD) is development, which meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (WCED; 1987). It is based on Economic Efficiency, Use of Local Resources and Local workforce, Conservation of Resources and Social Equity.

Similarly, the broader framework identified as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) deal with poverty and hunger, universal primary education, gender equality and empowering of women, reduced child mortality and improved maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, ensuring environmental sustainability, and developing global partnerships for development. It asserts that every individual has the right to dignity, freedom, equality, a basic standard of living that includes freedom from hunger and violence, and encourages tolerance and solidarity.

How can these be translated down the economic value chain in the context of the NER is a challenge.

As a case, this paper presents the intervention through design and enterprise in the bamboo craft sector in Meghalaya as the focus of study and analysis. Meghalaya is one of the NER states that is rich in bamboo as a natural resource. It generates job opportunities in the handicraft and construction sector and is a means for economic well-being in rural development. An earlier project reports on the concerted effort in developing the cane and bamboo (CAB) sector under a major UNDP supported project had failed to bring any significant transformation in the sector. The bamboo handicraft sector in the state continues to remain underdeveloped despite growing opportunities in the international markets for CAB products. The project followed a centralized top down approach with a focus on external expertise to bring about change towards development of the sector. Several government and non-government agencies were engaged on CAB project that aimed at "Promoting Livelihoods in North Eastern India: The Cane and Bamboo Networking Project" ran over two phases for a period of eight years between 2000 -2008. As per the UNDP report (2)

"...the project aimed at addressing a range of problems that plague NE India's bamboo and cane sector: (i) ineffective management of poverty; (ii) unsustainable natural resourced based livelihoods; (iii) the absence of a market driven approach; (iv) inadequate skills and design techniques; (v) inaccessibility to markets and services; (vi) inadequate models of socio-economic organization and entrepreneurship; and (vii) the capacity deficit in implementing bodies. By applying a value-chain approach and organizing beneficiaries into professional associations and groups to enhance industrial efficiency, marketing and trade, the proposed project aims to contribute to securing sustainable livelihood and employment generation for poor rural communities in the bamboo and cane sector."

The project outcome as reported by an external expert review committee, left much to be desired in the out-

come of the deliverables following this top down approach.

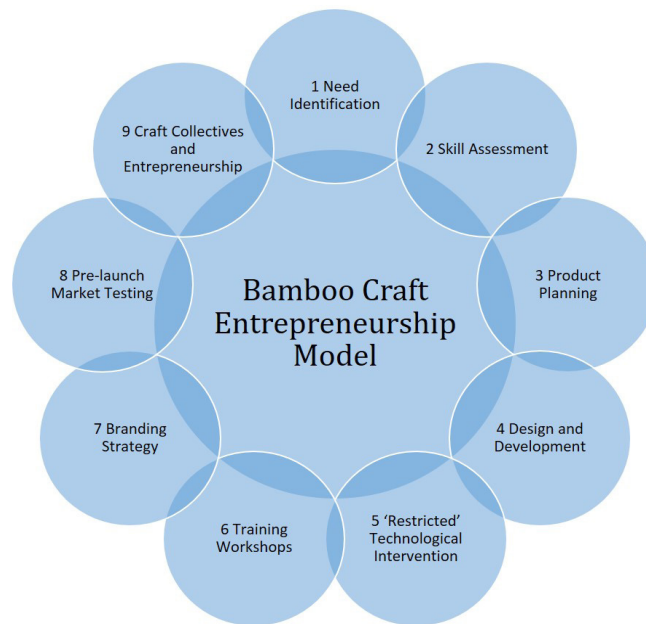
Critical reviews of the causes for this failure are very evident - Environment for enterprise face challenges of a very hilly and difficult terrain. Lack of access to market, low literacy levels, lack of awareness and exposure on the part of such remotely located communities being trained in ways and methods alien to their local skill sets; a lack of understanding of the community dynamics involving community beliefs, rituals and taboos; lack of exposure to enterprise, and business made these highly skilled craft communities vulnerable to bureaucratic corruption marked by lack of accountability.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper outlines the outcome of a project undertaken by a team of designers from IIT Guwahati for the Government of Meghalaya. It outlines an alternative model of intervention - a distributed sustainable model for the cane and bamboo handicraft sector in the northeastern region, that may prove sustainable.

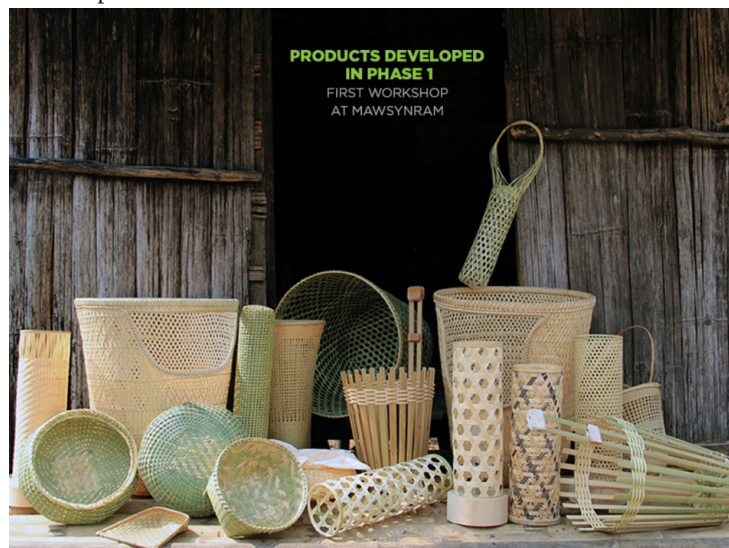
Following a participatory design method, it presents a case study on the development of a sustainable eco-system at the rural grass-root village level involving a 'bottom- up' approach with participation of state representatives, village headman, artisans, designers, private entrepreneur and retailer in developing a sustainable bamboo based rural enterprise.

A circular model involving the following 9 stages of development of the eco-system included



[Figure 1] Sustainable Entrepreneurship Model for Bamboo Craft

The range of product developed are shown below



[Figure 2] Range of bamboo product developed by the IIT Guwahati team and produced by the artisans of Syntein craft cluster, Meghalaya.

Pre-launch market test of these products among leading retail outlets has positive response reflected in inquiries of orders against the different products that the artisans are now trained and capable of producing. Restricted technology interventions have consciously been introduced in the form of molds that can be easily produced using local materials available in the local markets. Consistency and focus on quality of the products are thus achievable by the

local artisans. A data-base of the different artisans is now available for access directly by prospective buyers. Concept of community collectives has been discussed with participation of the village headman, and members of the self-help groups (SHG) formed in the village.

This enterprise model for it to be sustainable can still face challenges for its success due to local considerations. It becomes evident that MSDS has its leanings towards an organized industry oriented 'production centric' framework in its approach and outlook. The present MSDS framework may prove inadequate in applying to the handlooms and handicrafts sector that are distributed across remote locations across different geographical regions in India. These regional and localized units throw up challenges that require consideration of a complex web of socio-cultural; literacy levels; and livelihood factors as the basis for assessment and approach in the success of strategic sustainable interventions.

In the context of the bamboo crafts of Meghalaya, we may have to factor in the following aspects:

The local artisan communities belong to the Khasi tribal community. They follow a rich tradition of living in harmony with nature as reflected in the use of the forest produce in their environment. The forest in which they habitat is classified by the community into sacred forest, community forest and village forest. The forest produce as reflected in the classification can be used by the community in a regulated manner under norms set out by the community – an amazing sustainable concept laid down by the community in living in harmony with nature that needs emulation by modern urban communities.

The community is a very closely-knit community with the village headman playing a very influential role in community and collective decision making on all matters related to the village economy.

Artisan are highly skilled in bamboo-craft and have great potential for upscaling for larger market opportunities. The skills are imbibed as a family tradition and learnt from generations. This is both its strength and weakness. Their products are traditional and limited to local needs that remain unchanged but unique to the regional identity. Any new interventions through design that meet new market opportunities will be accepted only if it has acceptance in the community and can meet economic returns.

Literacy levels are low and restricted to the spoken local Khasi language. For the success of any enterprise, there is need for participation of an educated and committed work force interested in well-being and upliftment of the local community. Playing the role of a social activities can be the only acceptable model that builds upon winning the trust of the local community. This should be through a commitment to honesty, transparency matched with modern day business acumen that match modern day business. A 'bottoms-up', participatory and inclusive approach that is empathetic and trustworthy can ensure acceptance and result in success.

Craft activity is seasonal and is balanced with agricultural activities that the artisans engage in during part of the year. It becomes evident that the success of the enterprise rests on taking this seasonal nature of the activity into consideration. It is unlike an 'industrial business model' of production. Strategizing around seasonal introduction of new range of craft products that match this seasonal phenomenon of production may help the craft enterprise to succeed.

A model of payment against delivery can be the only way for such grass root craft enterprises to succeed, as the livelihood of the artisans is dependent on receiving payment against delivery. A system of introducing a revolving fund needs to be considered to ensure on the spot payment to the artisan against order, if such grass root interventions of enterprise hope to survive in the regular 'production centric' industrial models of business.

Considering these local factors mentioned above, it is suggested that context specific indices such as Inclusiveness index; Literacy index; Wellness index; Happiness index; Socio-political index; Cultural index specific to the region be defined and factored in the assessment of sustainable distributed initiatives. Such region specific sustainability indices may prove helpful in outlining successful strategies for development interventions.

Perhaps it is time that it may be prudent to follow a Gandhian approach to rural revival in which the success of setting up such small-scale distributed production units lies in activation of local 'panchayati raj' governance in the management of such distributed economic enterprises. The scope of developing other handicrafts, handlooms, organic produce, jewellery etc. can be developed based on regional strengths unique to each geographical region in a sustainable manner.

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