



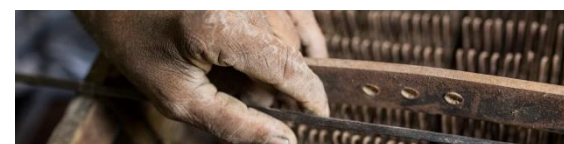
Twelve years of association and engagement with the handicraft sector of India has been quite a journey for us! Not only has the sector continued to awe us with its exquisite skills and richness but we have met and built relationships with many of the finest artisans, weavers and craft organizations and entrepreneurs across India over the last decade.

As a network of handicraft artisans and organizations, we have been able to understand, experience and address key needs and challenges through our initiatives, and have developed standard and proven models and methodologies for strengthening craft businesses. As the world has modernized with newer and advanced technology both in communication, marketing and manufacturing processes, we have tried to balance contemporization, process efficiency, global connect as well as rootedness to our traditional values and cultural identity. We believe that handicrafts are a living heritage that must grow and thrive as the artisans and the producers continue to live, practice the craft, and hope and aspire for a better economic and social standard of living.

We are starting this newsletter to share our stories and learn and connect with you through a more informal space. It has a Guest Column where we hope to publish interesting stories and articles from our readers and partners. The guest columnist for this inaugural issue is Adarsh Kumar, one of the founders and the first Executive Director of AIACA.

Madhura Dutta
Executive Director

Enterprise Support Program & Craftmark



Stories from the Field



Policy & Advocacy Initiatives



Highlights of 2015



Guest Column by Adarsh Kumar

ENTERPRISE SUPPORT PROGRAM- OUR FLAGSHIP INITIATIVE

Traditional craft skills have historically been a regular source of livelihood in rural India. However, lack of markets, devaluation of hand crafted products, declining skills and lack of sustainable livelihood opportunities in the modern world has led to dying craft skills, unemployment among youth, and their engagement in menial jobs, which adds to low self-esteem, exploitation, dire working conditions and further marginalization.

The key needs of this sector include excellence in traditional craft skills to successfully respond to market standards, continuation of the specialized craft skills through apprenticeship for younger generations, improving capacity for production, financial and business management, market understanding and effective merchandising, and creation of market and consumer awareness for recognition of the true value of unique craft skills and products.



AIACA has been addressing some of these key needs in terms of strengthening the value chain through its flagship initiative of Entrepreneurship Support Program, through which it has been providing a range of Business Development Services to crafts producer groups, including registration into formal businesses; instituting financial, inventory and production management systems; design and new product development; developing websites, brochures and other marketing materials; and linkages to commercial buyers in India and abroad. The impact of this programme can be seen in the business growth and sustained livelihoods of the artisan organizations with whom we have continued to engage for years. Currently, AIACA has a membership base of over 80 craft organizations from across India with an outreach of more than 20,000 artisans.



CRAFTMARK- TRADEMARK THAT CERTIFIES AUTHENTIC HANDMADE CRAFTS FROM INDIA

AIACA has been successfully running a National Certification Program called Craftmark for the last ten years.

Designed and run by AIACA, Craftmark is the only Certification for handmade craft processes and products in India, and is recognized by national and international markets. It has given a significant competitive edge to our Craftmark members, who have gained from direct market linkages and business growth not only financially but also through added value in terms of recognition for quality and excellence in skills, minimum wages paid to artisans of member organizations, and maintaining basic working conditions.



MUBARAKPUR WEAVES- WEAVING A FUTURE

Mubarakpur, a rural cluster in Azamgarh district of UP, had a tradition of handloom weaving dating from the 14th century. Over the last several decades, the handloom cluster of this area, despite having 30,000 weavers, was lost in oblivion as Varanasi's fame continued to overshadow it. The weavers lost access to contemporary markets and settled down into life as wage labourers weaving cheap imitation textiles for local traders.

With the aim of reviving this cluster through sustained livelihood generation, AIACA intervened in 2014 to find that the community was fraught with socio economic marginalization and low self-esteem, and had forgotten their identity as skilled weavers with a rich tradition. As one weaver Iftikar bhai put it, "Agar hamare paas koi aur chaara hota, hum yeh kargha utha ke ghar se bahar phek dete." Specifically, it had pushed the small close-knit community of Bohra weavers into a debt infested exploitative cycle of poverty. Within the larger community of handloom weavers, the Bohras were particularly backward and lacked exposure to markets and opportunities.

AIACA's livelihood intervention in Mubarakpur began in early 2015 through a pilot programme. The community was initially resistant, not trusting any market led initiative with their lost tradition. However, sustained mobilization and collectivization efforts led to the setting up of the Burhani Self Help Group, formed with ten weavers who came forward to join this initiative. AIACA conducted trainings on skill development, design and product development, business management skills and entrepreneurship, and provided the weavers direct access to market. Parallel to the business initiative, social welfare measures such as health camps and access to social welfare schemes were facilitated.



The weavers' first market exposure to Craft stores and exhibition spaces in Delhi was an eye opening experience for them which led them to believe that their skills have a demand. With sustained technical support, a range of handloom products was developed, and the brand name 'Mubarakpur Weaves' was created to establish an identity of the producers. Subsequent appreciation, demand and sale of their silk products across multiple platforms across the country – Delhi, Chennai, Pune, Mumbai, Bhopal, Bangalore – instilled confidence and an entrepreneurial spirit in them. This motivation spread to other weavers in the community, soon leading to the establishment of a second SHG.

From the beginning, AIACA focused on entrepreneurship through development of a producer collective. Being primary stakeholders, the weavers themselves set in place systems essential for the smooth functioning of the SHGs, and establishing their roles and responsibilities in managing stock and accounts. Finances, quality control, raw material distribution, identifying exhibitions for participation were activities initially undertaken by AIACA, but currently the SHGs are equipped to handle most these activities on their own with AIACA playing more of a monitoring role.

This producer group is now a member of Dastkar, the Daskari Haat Samiti and Craftmark. Weavers have met with representatives of these organizations directly and were able to incorporate their inputs into their products. Through a continuous training process, the weavers are now taking all production and procurement decisions collectively. They are directly linked to markets and receive exhibition calls in the name of "Mubarakpur weaves". Charu Verma of Dastkari Haat Samiti mentioned - "Aapka kaam itna achha hai ki ab hum log aapko kabhi nahi chhorenge."

Today these SHGs have gained a strong business orientation and financial independence. They are growing into a sustainable enterprise, regenerating their corpus through profits. A corpus of over 15 lac has been generated through sales in a year's time and their wages have increased by over 90%. They are debt free, and most importantly, working as a unified group. The Bohra weavers' journey from wage labourers to an enterprise enjoying direct market and profit share is heartening to see. Their journey of empowerment through collectivization and institution building is perfectly summed by weaver Abuzer:

"For the first time I feel I am a decision-maker. My voice is heard and my views are important."



TODAS OF THE NILGIRIS

The Todas are a tribal community living on the isolated Nilgiri plateau of Tamil Nadu. They have a distinctive traditional style of embroidery called pugur (or flower). Motifs are embroidered on 2 ply cotton fabric by counting each thread. The traditional Toda embroidery does not use any other colour except red and black, as it is symbolic of their cultural beliefs.

The women in the community traditionally embroidered and sold the *poothkuli* (a large shawl that identifies a Toda) in the local market. However, over decades, limited market, tediousness of the craft and rise in prices of the raw materials led to a decline in the practice of this craft. AIACA has been working with the community in the Nilgiris with the objective of reviving the embroidery and preserving the identity of the Toda producers through sustained livelihood.

Through community building, organization development, innovative and contemporary design interventions, and market promotion, a sustainable enterprise has been set up which continues to work with this craft tradition. Started as a small SHG called Shalom, the craft cluster has been registered as a society of Toda artisans. Their sales have grown from 6.5 lakhs to 16 lakhs in the last four years. The intervention has not only rebuilt livelihood opportunities for the women embroiders but also lent a sense of pride and recognition amongst the practising community. The added value to the growth in business has been through finishing and packaging trainings, support with tools and machinery and establishment of a raw material bank.

Today, through this intervention, Toda embroidery is being increasingly appreciated by consumers and craft lovers in India and abroad. Their products have come a long way from catering to local markets to being marketed in national exhibitions and on mainstream platforms such as Dastkar, CoHands, TRIFED, Jaypore and Amazon.



HUNARMAND

In 2011, we met for the first time the young women embroiders of the remote and insurgency affected Kulgam district of Kashmir, who had aspirations in their hearts for independence and identity, but no resources to fulfil their dreams. INTACH J&K came forward to seek support from AIACA to support these women embroiders with livelihood opportunities. After an initial study, AIACA started the intervention by organizing the community into a producer group and giving them basic skilling, leading to more advanced design and finally developing a range of home décor products. The project was named “Hunarmand” by INTACH J&K. True to the name, the women developed themselves into skilled artisans ready for the market. Promotions through AIACA soon opened up exciting market opportunities for them from abroad. They fulfilled their first export order in 2012. Since then they have been a regular producer for the export market.



The group of 30 women who initially came forward earn a decent monthly income and are financially independent. When we meet them today, they smile and say that they are decision makers in their own lives! Today, the women are empowered and are training other women embroiders in their village to increase their capacity for production



POLICY & ADVOCACY

Despite being the second largest employment generation sector in India, the craft sector has not been receiving the policy support it deserves. The rapidly changing economic scenario within India is creating new threats and opportunities for the handloom and handicraft sectors. In this backdrop, AIACA seeks to provide a supportive policy framework for the transition of the unorganized and fragmented crafts sector into an organized, entrepreneurship based industry and as a significant contributor to the mainstream economy along with socioeconomic development of the large population of highly skilled but poor and marginalized rural artisans of the country.

AIACA being a network of handicraft organizations and artisans from across India is uniquely positioned to influence policy by building evidence through grass root information, data, case studies, multi-stakeholder dialogues and direct voices of the stakeholders on the one hand, and engaging closely with the government on the other.

National Policy Roundtable in Varanasi

On the occasion of the launch of the USTTAD Scheme, a national policy roundtable was organized in May, 2015 in Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh). The event was supported by the Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India, and organized by AIACA in partnership with ACCESS Development Services. It was attended by industry experts, government officials and local weavers.

The policy roundtable focused on two key themes of ‘Skill Development of youth in traditional craft skills - ensuring dignity in work and life’ and ‘Invest in Handicrafts’. The recommendations highlighted that Entrepreneurship development in the crafts sector should be undertaken as an overarching model which binds education, skill development, improvements in production systems, design interventions, business and market development and financing in an integrated manner, with measurable economic and social development indicators. Craft-based enterprises should be supported for achieving economic viability through strengthening marketing and branding of crafts, attracting financial investment in the sector, mainstreaming crafts as a significant contributor to national economy, and charting out a systematic approach for social security support to craftworkers. A detailed recommendation report was submitted to the Ministry of Minority Affairs which served as a key document for the review of the scheme.



AIACA is engaged in research and collation of all government social welfare schemes in an easy and comprehensive format, across different Ministries relevant for artisans so that artisans and artisan organizations can access information about benefits and how to apply through a single window of the Craftmark website.

Handloom Spaces Seminar in Delhi

A Seminar on ‘Handloom Spaces - Locating Mubarakpur as a Paradigm for Renewal’ was designed and conducted by AIACA in October 2015 in partnership with Craft Revival Trust and IIC, Delhi. The Seminar highlighted the importance of craft based entrepreneurship models in the context of the success story of Mubarakpur. Being in the initial stage of the intervention the objective was to have a multi-stakeholder consultation to discuss ways forward and learn from other existing models.

The panellists included Ritu Sethi, Chairperson of Craft Revival Trust, Sudha Dhingra, Head of Design in NIFT and Sunita Shanker, a renowned fashion designer, and the Master weavers themselves. Among the eminent participants were Ms. Rathie Vinay Jha, President of AIACA, former secretary of the Ministry of Tourism and guiding force in setting up the National Institution of Fashion Technology (NIFT), and Ms Moe Chiba, Chief of Culture sector, UNESCO.



GUEST COLUMN

Founded in 2004, in the context of rapid economic growth and structural change in the Indian economy, AIACA has been working on a range of issues to promote market-led growth for the crafts sector; and increased incomes and improved living standards of crafts producers. Over the past decade, AIACA has conducted policy research and advocacy on a range of issues including access to credit for crafts producers and environmental and health and safety standards for the sector; developed a crafts-certification system called the Craftmark; assisted sales and outreach of member producer groups and enterprises through commercial trade catalogues, trade fairs and order fulfillment; and assisted in developing and strengthening back-end production systems through a range of product design and business development services.

However, the overall challenge for the sector remains largely the same today: of developing a layer of different types of crafts enterprises that leverage the traditional skills of crafts producers and connect them to global markets in a manner that benefits them. Like Italy, India can also leverage its immense base of crafts skills into a commercially vibrant and globally competitive base of Medium and Small Enterprises making high-quality products under globally known brand-names. But there are a number of structural problems that need to be addressed to enable this transition.

Firstly, fragmented policy frameworks and lack of policy vision for the sector hampers public investment into capacity building from an enterprise growth stand point. Rather than housed in separate and fragmented departments that focus on scheme and subsidy delivery, the agenda of expanding crafts enterprises needs to be firmly embedded in the Make in India, Startup India and the Skilling India initiatives.

Secondly, a number of direct support initiatives are needed to promote entrepreneurs in the sector, including from crafts communities themselves. Already, in addition to established companies such as FabIndia, we are seeing an enhanced pace of growth of enterprises. These enterprises can be classified into a few different categories: online sites such as jaypore.com and craftsvilla; luxury and designer brands such Anita Dongre and Ekaya; export oriented and production units established by entrepreneurs from local crafts communities; and a number of smaller designer-entrepreneurs across the country undertaking new product development for retail and exports.

These entrepreneurs and enterprises serve as pipelines to connect crafts producers to the global economy. The explosion of online retail, both crafts-specific and general, provides significant new opportunities to connect local pockets of skilled producers to mainstream markets. Specialized support initiatives are needed to scale up such enterprise growth in the sector including incubation programs to scale up promising entrepreneurs; debt and equity support windows through specialized funds and partnerships with financial institutions; specialized logistical assistance needed to reach new online distribution channels; and providing business advisory services along a range of areas to help scale up such enterprises.

The challenge over the next decade is to ensure that the enterprise-led transition occurs quickly enough to make the sector economically vibrant and remunerative, before a bulk of crafts producers exit the sector to other occupations. The challenge for AIACA over the next five years can be stated simply: can we build coalitions across crafts communities, industry, government and civil society to (a) Insert crafts enterprises as a focus area within Make in India, Startup India and Skilling India and (c) promote 1,000 new commercially successful and scalable enterprises over the next five years?

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HIGHLIGHTS 2015

- AIACA has set up the Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Society in Varanasi as a membership based organization of handloom weavers and artisans of UP to promote authentic handloom brocade products and local traditional handicrafts. The organization, aka Varanasi Weavers Hub, is working with the mission of ensuring authenticity, quality, fair wages and fair prices and provides direct business facilitation services to the producers in partnership with the local government. Currently, it is linked to 5000 handloom weavers.
- The Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Society has been incorporated in the Advisory Committee of the Certificate Course on "Handloom Entrepreneur" started by Indian Institute of Handloom Technology (IIHT, Varanasi) under the National Handloom Development Programme of Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India. We attended the first Advisory Committee meeting on 7 Jan 2016.
- 2700+ Varanasi rural and marginalized handloom weavers have successfully accessed social welfare schemes from the state government through the Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Society.
- AIACA became a Member of the Rajasthan Crafts Council and was invited to attend its first meeting in Oct 2015 under the chairpersonship of Hon'ble Chief Minister.
- Export-Import Bank of India and AIACA signed a MOU as part of the GRID programme through which the latter provides loan support, advance against working capital requirements and grant-based capacity-building support for the promotion of craft-based exports from India. AIACA will ensure greater outreach and impact of this scheme by linking its members and helping them to clear the bank's due diligence process.
- AIACA joined hands with Google to help Indian artisans build more sustainable businesses through the use of digital technology.
- AIACA offers a Student Research Fellowship Programme for students of Design Institutes across India, for documenting traditional craft processes and collecting demographic data of the craft clusters. We continue to partner with students from IICD (Jaipur), NID (Ahmedabad), Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology (Bangalore).

UPCOMING EVENTS

MUBARAKPUR WEAVES AT "LOOMS WEAVES N MORE" BY AESTHETIQUE

Dates: 8th to 10th March 2016 Venue: Ice Skating Rink, Kolkata