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## A framework for institutional design intervention in Indian crafts sector

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### Abstract:

*In India, the crafts and the design sectors share a symbiotic relationship. Design education in India, influenced by the Ulm and Bauhaus schools, creates designers who are trying to bridge the gap between the past and present, in an effort to create a design language that leads to renewal of the craft traditions and ensure the sustainability of our living crafts legacy. Government and Design institutions also create and undertake independent projects for the upliftment of the crafts. However, there are many drawbacks to such schemes. It is well known that these schemes focus only on the creation of newer products and artifacts only, without considering the context of any craft itself. In this paper, a framework has been proposed for an alternate design led intervention in the crafts sector. The components include: Creation of a Design Cell, Guidelines preparation, Research, Seminar, Creation of craft specific Action Plan, Design Development Workshop, Exhibition and Documentary.*

*This framework hopes to celebrate the sanctified relation between the crafts and its craftspersons, in the creation of market-friendly products, facilitated by the designer, while bridging the gap between the old and the new.*

**Key words:** Crafts, Design, Designer, Design Schemes, Policies, Research, Tradition, Theoretical model, Agencies

In India, craft is not just a cultural and creative endeavor; it is also a mainstream commercial product. Because of these dual reasons, crafts and over 10 million craftspeople have lived on despite so many crises. This is also the strength of the craft.

After independence, in India, design and crafts interaction has been realized through many platforms, notably art, design or architecture education and practice sustained through cultural anthropologists, sociologists, historians, art curators and those immersed in tradition.

Both the Government and several leading national institutions of technology, management and design encourage craft and design development, entrepreneurship and incubation of new initiatives in India. The IIT's, IIM's and NID have all set up incubators to encourage both students and faculty in realizing their innovative dreams through these nascent incubation initiatives. Since independence, numerous committees, commissions and task forces, both governmental and non-governmental, have sat to evaluate and strategize the future of Indian craft. Reports have been written, action plans have been drawn up. The various national institutes that work upon design led interventions in the crafts sector are as follows:

- National Institute of Design (NID)
- National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT)
- Development Commissioner Handicrafts (DCH)
- Department of Science and Culture
- Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC)
- National Centre for Textile Design
- Weavers Service Center
- Rural Non Farm Development Agency
- Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME)
- Crafts Council of India
- Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI)
- National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD)
- All India Handicrafts Board (AIHB)

- Export Promotion Council
- National Center for Design and Product Development (NCDPD)

However, most of design led intervention work in the crafts sector has focused on the creation of newer products and artifacts only, without considering the context of any craft itself. The model, proposed here, therefore, presupposes the following:

- The model presupposes the execution at government level
- Awareness of the number of craftspeople engaged in a particular craft
- The skill of craftspeople as suggested by relevant agencies
- Awareness of the documentation of the processes, design interventions and market feasibility of a particular craft
- Awareness of the socio-economic conditions of the craftspeople engaged in that particular craft
- A large amount of such archival information is available at both institutional and individual level
- The model does not involve aspects such as insurances, cards and health issues, et al.

**Intent of the proposal of the Model:**

- Connect with the craftspersons and experience crafts through their lives as a lived tradition
- Create the much required synergy between the craftspersons and designers, as the latter learns from the former
- Documentation of the traditional knowledge systems into a format that is easily accessible to all, with the belief that knowledge is power

- Create an independent status as a relevant intervention for the crafts sector in a Knowledge-based Economy, that emphasizes the shift from manufacturing to services and then to knowledge.

## **Beneficiaries:**

### *Primary Beneficiaries:*

- Craftspersons who work with the crafts on a tangible level and live it on a spiritual plane
- Designers, who will unlearn, learn and relearn the processes of creation, through their pedagogic lens and through the craftspersons' perspective

### *Secondary Beneficiaries:*

- End Consumer, who will know the name of the craftsman and the region to which the crafts belongs to, and will carry, not just a hand created product, but also a story- a story that they will tell their children and grandchildren
- Markets, both global and national, as they compete with the traditional knowledges and products

## **Components of the model**

### **A particular craft domain as the only emphasis**

We occupy a space and time where technology and ease of communication have brought us closer together than ever before. However, our cultural specificities and the stumbling blocks of languages continue to erode the project of shared craft discourse.

The paper proposes that the model must cater and define its program to the suitability of each craft. What is valid for a particular craft, might not be valid for another. While the broad outline (proposed below) might be valid for commencement, each craft must be thought of as an

independent domain of knowledge and hence treated such. It is also proposed that each sub sector within a craft category (as is the preferred nomenclature), be treated as a craft domain on its own.

But, what happens when a particular craft is introduced in a region that never worked on this craft (the concept of 'induced craft')? The model is based on the premise that any craft removed out of its region, is no longer the same craft. It is another craft, by another name, and takes its inspiration and materials from the region that it gets based in. The 'ifs and buts' of such a position is for another place to discuss and critique. However, if so many crafts based on their regional attributes, flourish, it only means more craft styles, more options for the end customer, more jobs, less migration, newer archives of information, richer knowledge domains and larger information networks. This will also mean more design opportunities for our students and graduates.

### **Creation of a Design Cell**

The author proposes this model to the DC (H), as an alternative to the existing programs. The model proposes to bank upon the existing comprehensive craft network of the DC (H). It differs in the fact that each craft be treated as a separate domain and not as a sub cluster.

### **Guidelines preparation**

The model proposes the creation of guidelines for the researchers as a basic reference for their interactions with the craftspersons in that particular craft. The guidelines might have the following, and more:

- Biographical details of craftspersons
- History of their involvement in the craft
- Regional and geographic profile
- Material profile
- Processes, skills and tools

- Daily life of craftsperson, the way s/he interacts with the craft
- Crafts as a community enterprise
- Craft as a social indicator
- Cultural semiotics of the crafts and the craftspersons
- Craftspersons' understanding of his market and his products
- Work done through other schemes and implementing agencies
- A list of references, written and pictorial

This guideline handbook will serve as a beginning point for the research. It will serve as a crash course for those embarking on the beautiful journey of craft exploration and product creation. After the guidelines are prepared, the agency shall award the project to a design studio only. The design studio must have at least 3 years experience in the field. The choice of the design studio is also the first check point in the project. The model excludes design professionals and design institutions. The design studio shall be obliged to employ only those designers who have minimum 3 years work experience. Freshers and Graduates must not be allowed as lead designers on the team. It must be ensured that the documentation must mention the time and place of documentation.

## **Research**

As enumerated earlier, the relevance of research and the creation of theory-model is not just an external objective, scientific, positivistic criteria, but will be generated in the light of the following:

It will be led by the researcher / practitioner who will have an intimate, experiential and 'tacit' understanding and a greater degree of insight, that is only possible from knowledge and the nature and context of the project.

Since it is crafts based research, it must focus on a 'practical' (practice-led) methodology, and definitely will include a technological or materials science type of inquiry.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of this type of research, it is often the extent of the transferable knowledge and application of the craftsperson's aesthetic critical faculties and physical skills which will determine the value of their research to others working in the field of Applied Arts.

Each craft is unique because of its location is a particular region. As a result, that particular region flourishes because of its economic potential. The region also becomes a brand because of its association with the crafts. A large part of the research will concentrate on the regional attributes of that particular craft and elucidate on the symbiotic relationship between the two. For example, *Ayyanar* village in *Tamil Nadu* and *Bankura* district in West Bengal are well known all over, for their terracotta horses. While both are terracotta horses, they share different attributes in terms of motifs, size and the finish. It is imperative that when these horses are sold in markets, they must come with the region tag, so that the average customer understands the aesthetic and regional difference between the two.

The craftsperson does not merely make the craft, he lives the craft, and he gains through practical work. The craft is much more a 'calling' than a trade, and has to be understood and researched as such. The research will emphasize on the craftsperson's history and connection with the craft, the way s/he sees it and lives it. May be, it will not do much, may be it will bring newer perspectives to the ways of looking at crafts, may be, it will uncover the layers forgotten, may be, it will become a common place knowledge for all of us to appreciate. This shall be the strength of the craft, the strength that comes from the craftsperson's own life, life within his community, the use of certain motifs, his trading skills, et al.

A study of motifs, symbolism and imagery will be an important part of the research process, though, in a different context. New motifs and products have developed with the growing pace of globalization. But, how do these motifs get introduced into a particular crafts? Is it simply at the level of creation of new motifs, or is it the imaginative and creative genius of the craftsman to have created such a product? Is the craftsman really 'creating' or is he working at a daily wage of INR 175? The research will take into account the development of motifs and symbolism, only to empower the design faculty in the craftsman. And, in the process, ask and answer the question, "why is every craft cluster short of design?"

So, who will conduct this research? The paper proposes that a team of two professionals, a product designer, a blanket term that we are using for designers across all crafts types (only those with a keen sensitivity to crafts) and a communication designer. The model does not wish to include researchers with an art history/ sociology/ insurance/ rural management/ social work/ NGO background. These professionals will be a part of the team, but will be added to the program as per the requirements. While a product designer will interact with the craftsman through material and everyday life, a communication designer shall use his/ her analytical/ aesthetic/ creative skills to document the craftsman, the craft and its environment. The inclusion of a communication designer will be beneficial as the mode of documentation will be audio visual in nature. Thus, the research will be well- knit archival information of both audio and running visual that is possibly the best form to archive the contemporary crafts practices. The inclusion of these two domains will complement each other and help formulate data and material into a cohesive form.

## **Seminar**

A seminar will be conducted after the research work is over with. This seminar will be a platform to showcase the research work associated with that particular craft. It will be a reinforcement of the fact that all stakeholders are an equal part of the process. The seminar, spanning over a day or two, will have government officials, design professionals, the concerned artisans, craft exporters and business people, design students, and shall discuss on the following:

- Review of the research done
- Interesting trivia about the crafts, craftspersons and their village life
- Development of potential products in that particular craft
- Market perspectives
- Further course of work in that particular cluster
- Become a platform for the students to engage in that particular craft
- Publicize the program to its 'rightful' audience

The proceedings of the seminar will be documented in all formats and a copy of the same will be sent to all stakeholders, in all concerned languages.

## **Creation of craft specific Action Plan**

The results and proceedings of the seminar will then decide the further course of action. The number of design workshops, duration of these workshops, number of products to be developed at each workshop, the financial outlay and implications, will be a part of the Action Plan. The Action Plan will be shared with craftspersons quite in advance, so that they are aware and ready for the further course of action.

This will be the second check point of the project success.

## **Design Development Workshop**

Design development workshop shall be conducted with the craftspersons in their own region/ homes/ villages. The workshop will be led by the product designer, who was involved in the research process, based on the creative brief that the products shall be derived from the existing traditional knowledge domain of the craftspersons, with a deft use of his/her skill. The workshops might focus on, and more:

- Processes
- Prototype development
- Batch Production
- Packaging

## **Exhibition and Documentary**

The finished products will find a celebratory expression through a themed, scenographic exhibition, which shall invite government officials, agencies, crafts practitioners, exporters, design professionals. The exhibition shall be a space where relevant parties can book their orders with the craftspersons directly, without any intermediaries. It might be important to note that the product design and drawings shall rest with the craftspersons themselves, so that they become the real custodians of their own creations. The exhibition shall showcase a documentary (film/ audio-visual) on that particular craft. This will be another deliverable for the design team.

The exhibition shall be the third and final check point in the process.

## **Duration and Stakeholders:**

The duration for this model is roughly estimated between 8- 14 months, depending upon the crafts processes.

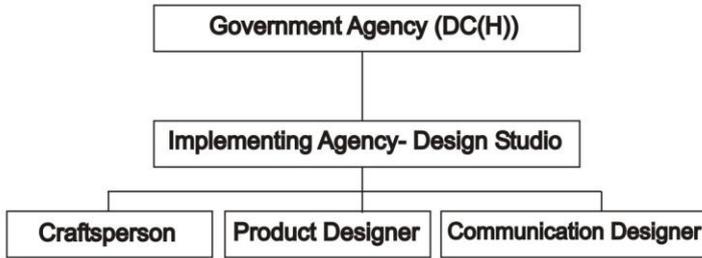
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<b>Phase</b>	<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Duration</b>
Guidelines preparation and project awarding	Agency officials	1 month
Research orientation	Product Designer (minimum 3 years experience) Communication Designer (minimum 2 years experience)	20 days
Seminar	Concerned Craftspersons Product Designer Communication Designer Government officials Crafts and Design Practitioners Craft exporters Business People Design Students	1- 2 days
Creation of craft specific Action Plan	Concerned Craftspersons Product Designer Communication Designer Agency officials	15 days
Design Development Workshop	Concerned Craftspersons Product Designer Communication Designer Agency officials	Spread over 3-8 months
Exhibition and Documentary	Concerned Craftspersons Product Designer Communication Designer Exhibition Designer Government officials Crafts and Design Practitioners Craft exporters Business People Design Students	2 days

Other kinds of personnel support (though not mandatory):

- Project Coordinators
- Translators and Interpreters
- Documentation professionals

## Organogram



## Conclusion

The model will have its own independent status as a relevant intervention for the crafts sector in a Knowledge-based Economy, that emphasizes the shift from manufacturing to services and then to knowledge.