



## QUESTIONING HANDMADE IN CONTEXT OF INDIAN CRAFT

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### ABSTRACT

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*Presently consumers are witnessing a third wave of craft in the world. It seems that this time handmade is their favourite cue. Present study argues that exaggeration of handmade in context of craft may led to consumer behaviour that buying handmade contributes in authentic or sustainable consumption. We conducted a review of literature of Indian craft from production and consumption perspective. Present study helps to understand the debate of handmade versus machine-made in context of Indian craft.*

### INTRODUCTION

In India, salesmen often revive our interest in purchase using a punchline: *ye dekhiye madam, price thoda jada hai, par pura kaam haath ka hai* (see this madam, little expensive but completely handmade). And, if you are not already examining work with your hands, he further increased curiosity by asking you to touch and feel the craft. In present study, craft means “making something well through hand skill (Adamson, 2013, p. xxiv).”

In the ongoing craft “renaissance” (Barton, 2011; Luckman, 2015), there is a trend to use “handmade” as an umbrella term for handicrafts, handlooms and other artisanal items made using hand skill. For example, in context of India, Maureen Liebl & Tirthankar Roy (2003) published a paper “Handmade in India: Preliminary Analysis of Crafts Producers and Crafts Production” to highlight the challenges and opportunities for Indian craft sector. Similarly, Aditi Ranjan & M. P. Ranjan (2009) compiled an encyclopedia of Indian crafts titled as *Handmade in India: A Geographic Encyclopedia of Indian Handicrafts*. Even american DIY activist, Faythe Levine named both her book (2008) and movie (2009) as *Handmade Nation: The Rise of D.I.Y. Art, Craft, and Design*.

Harvard Business Review (HBR), a popular business magazine, published an article “How the Internet Saved Handmade Goods” (Downes & Nunes, 2014). They argued how digital advancement has re-boosted the business of retro products like handicrafts. New York Times columnist Rob Walker wrote an article “Handmade 2.0” (2007) to report the exponential growth of handmade selling company Etsy<sup>1</sup>. BBC (2015) released three films titled as *Handmade* featuring wood, metal and glass based crafts and their techniques.

Craft is “predominantly handmade” (Gupta, 2011) and based upon “hand skill” (Adamson, 2013) and “manual labour” (Liebl & Roy, 2003) or “manual contribution” (UNESCO & ITC, 1997). Still, we listed a variety of works to exhibit how since the beginning of 21st-century all complexities of craft have been conspicuously attempted to reflect just in one word handmade. Perhaps those authors used craft and handmade interchangeably just to simplify the confusion (Kettley, 2010) and speculation (Adamson, 2007) around the term craft. And may be the difference between handmade and craft is just a case of potayto, potahto<sup>2</sup>. But we sincerely doubt it. Hence, before calling the whole thing off, there is an urgent need to explore whether exaggerating handmade enriches or restricts our understanding of craft. We would like to underline the implications of overvaluing handmade in context of Indian crafts by sharing an anecdote from India itself.

You might have seen beautifully painted “Horn OK please” at the back of heavy Indian vehicles. This phrase implies that in India “it is necessary to sound the horn to warn any vehicle of a desire to overtake, and this has become accepted custom (Edensor, 2005, p. 114).” This means horn is assumed as compulsory for safe driving in India. We propose in a similar way exaggeration of handmade in craft sector may lead to “Handmade OK please” culture in which a noisy horn of handmade is always felt necessary to identify anything as craft. We have two reasons why proliferation of “Handmade OK please” culture is problematic.

First, overvaluing of handmade makes difficult for craft to break the dichotomy of craft and machine (Adamson, 2013; Bryan-Wilson, 2012; Campbell, 2005; Kettley, 2010). And, the second issue is with the easy connection between

handmade and authenticity (Ingold, 2013, p. 122) or sustainability (Greer, 2008) which led to the marketing strategy of “buy handmade” to “change the economy or save the world (Matchar, 2015).” With this background, present study argues that the synonymous use of handmade and craft may lead to “Handmade OK please” culture which prompts consumers to buy handmade or craft as authentic or sustainable products.

### HANDMADE OK PLEASE

(Collins online dictionary, 2017) offers three different meanings of the word handmade: learner meaning of handmade is “Handmade objects have been made by someone using their hands or using tools rather than by machines.”; in British English, handmade means “made by hand, not by machine, esp with care or craftsmanship” and in American English, handmade means “made by hand, not by machine; made by a process requiring manual skills.” All these definitions of handmade show the importance of making things with hands using limited tools and machines. A study of consumers led by three professors of marketing define handmade products as “one that is presented to consumers as being made by hand or a hand process and not by a machine or a machinal process (Fuchs, Schreier, & van Osselaer, 2015).”

We too acknowledge that “brain is hand and hand is brain” (Wilson, 2010 quoted in Ingold, 2013, p. 112). To understand the complexity of using handmade in context of crafts, let’s see a recent example of feud related to craft selling organisation Etsy. In 2013, Etsy’s decision to alter its original definition of handmade outraged its consumers (Harris, 2014; Holpuch, 2013; Stinson, 2014). In defence of Etsy, textile expert Professor E. J. W. Barber argued that:

The truth is that almost none of the objects that we think of as handmade truly are. And that has been the case for thousands of years — long before Etsy announced this latest change to its website. ... it is the human care, effort and ingenuity used to create an object that is important, and not whether it fits the exact definition of “handmade” (Barber, 2013).

We agree with professor Barber that organisations are free to alter their policies and; products should be evaluated for their ingenuity instead of whether they are machine-made or handmade. Still, we think that she should have reflected on the implications of redefining handmade on Etsy’s founding principles, as done by her readers in the comment section of her article. We included here one of the top five comments received on her article and recommended by her readers.

An entertaining article yet it doesn’t address the problem. Etsy will see a flood of imported mass produced quasi-handmade items. Eventually buyers who are willing to pay a premium give up when they realize this is occurring. An individual high quality artisan won’t be able to compete. Prices will plummet, and Etsy will turn into a mere numbers game. That’s what happened to the Ebay handmade jewelry market and why Etsy was different and trusted.—Einstein, America-November 12, 2013 (159 readers recommend)

This comment shows that consumers are not so fussy whether the crafts are handmade or machine-made. What actually they care for is where does Etsy stands, as an organisation, for its original commitment towards the anti-capitalist (Chafkin & Cao, 2017), anti-corporate, environment friendly and community based model of business (see buy

handmade pledge mentioned by Rob Walker, 2007). At this point it is apt to know how craft selling companies incorporate handmade component in their organisational vision, philosophy and values. We went through the official websites of nine different craft brands. It includes four craft brands popular in India: *Fabindia*, *MotherEarth*, *Hansiba* and *Good Earth* (suggested by Mamidipudi, Syamasundari, & Bijker, 2012; Tiwari & Dutta, 2013; Wood, 2011) and five well known craft buying and selling international organisations: *Etsy*, *aficra*, *Handmade at Amazon (HAM)*, *Zibbet* and *DaWanda* (Davila, 2016). Let’s start with *Fabindia*. It is a fifty years old Indian craft brand which introduces itself as:

India’s largest private platform for products that are made from traditional techniques, skills and hand-based processes. Fabindia links over 55,000 craft based rural producers to modern urban markets, thereby creating a base for skilled, sustainable rural employment, and preserving India’s traditional handicrafts in the process. Fabindia’s products are natural, craft based, contemporary, and affordable. ... The vision continues to be to maximize the handmade element in our products, whether it is handwoven textiles, hand block printing, hand embroidery or handcrafting home products (Fabindia, 2017).

The organisational philosophy of Mother Earth (2017) is to “providing great quality goods while nurturing the environment and building on the strengths of marginalized rural communities to create sustainable livelihoods and overall prosperity. Its mission is to enhance and create secure artisanal livelihood through socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.” Another Indian brand Hansiba (2017) claims that their “All the products are hand embroidered and hand crafted, 65% of all sales go directly to the artisans, and the artisans are the shareholders and suppliers of the Company.” Good Earth, a twenty years old Indian craft brand, store goes like this:

20 years of a design aesthetic that is crafted by hand, inspired by nature, and enchanted by history. ... crafts-focused approach to luxury design and reviving the authentic skills of the crafts communities of India. ... we are known for our storytelling through surface design and sustaining the craft traditions of our culture. ... we look at the world beyond India to build on our legacy as advocates for sustainable luxury (Goodearth, 2017).

The following five organisations are famous international brands for buying and selling crafts. *Etsy*, since its foundation in 2005, has become a business model for several trade books which explain how to be a craftpreneur. *Etsy* (2017a) introduces itself as a marketplace to “Discover handmade items, vintage goods and craft supplies you can’t find anywhere else.” *Etsy* (2017b) defines handmade as a “spectrum” which is:

On one end, we have makers - sellers who are literally making their items with their own hands (or tools). On the other end, we have designers - sellers who design their items, but rely entirely on production partners to help physically produce them. Many handmade sellers fall in the middle of the spectrum because they are both making and designing their items.

*Aficra* is another popular american craft brand which claims to “buy and sell American handmade products. Our mission

is to support local artists and artisans living in America by connecting them with handmade admirers across the globe (2017).” Among other brands *Handmade at Amazon* (HMA) is Etsy’s major competitor due its large consumer base (Tabuchi, 2015). HMA (2017) claims that it is a place to “find unique, handcrafted products from Artisans around the world ... Buying handmade is about more than the finished product. Connect with the Artisan through their profile page and discover their personal story to feel confident your piece is genuinely made by hand.” *Zibbet*, a consumer trusted brand, reaches out to its consumers as:

When you buy from Zibbet, you’re supporting an individual seller who manages the creation process from conception, right through to packaging and shipping the product to your doorstep. We’re proud to be the largest marketplace in the world that stays true to the definition of handmade, where products are in fact hand made, not mass-produced in some factory (2017).

*DaWanda* (2017) is one of the biggest online craft seller in Europe. It attracts its consumers as “Looking for a completely unique product, the kind that no one else has? ... you can relay onto DaWanda to provide something unique, handmade and special. ... DaWanda is an online market place for one of a kind articles and hand crafted goods. As a counter pole to mass produced goods, DaWanda is the place to contact for people who appreciate the special nature of objects made by hand.”

This brief profiling of craft brands shows that their marketing strategies are framed around craft’s connection with hand processes and small-scale production. While on one hand, Indian brands market handmade as contribution in sustainable

development. On the other hand, western organisations peddle handmade as unique or authentic items an alternative of mass produced goods. It is problematic when these brands market “buy handmade” (Bryan-Wilson, 2012; Matchar, 2015) or let’s say buy craft as authentic (Ingold, 2013, p. 122) or sustainable consumption (Greer, 2008) just because they are handmade or produced at small scale enterprises (Roberts & Tribe, 2008) which led to “Handmade OK please” culture (similar to “Horn OK please” culture as mentioned in an earlier anecdote).

My point is that claiming craft’s authenticity or sustainability through exaggerating handmade is done just to take the advantage of handmade versus machine-made dichotomy; and easy connection between handmade and authenticity or sustainability. To understand how this happened we ought to dip into the production and consumption history of craft in general and in reference of India.

### CRAFT’S DEPENDENCY IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

At the dawn of India’s independence, there was a “battle” between two ideas whether to invest in power-based large scale industries or in the small scale enterprises like craft sector (Herman, 1956). India decided to invest in both of them and even today runs them side-by-side (Mamidipudi et al., 2012). Though Indian craft sector contributes significantly in the earnings of India, see table 1. Time and again studies report sorry state of Indian crafts: “handicrafts are dying” (Herman, 1956); “industry cry for attention” (Jain, 1986); “killing our own golden geese” (Jaitly, 1994); “pessimistic picture of domestic market” (Liebl & Roy, 2003); “sunset activity” (Chatterjee, 2010); and “slowly dying” (Planning Commission of India, 2012).

**Table 1: An overview of Indian craftsector**

Craft	Employment	Export
Handloom	43.31	2,353.00
Handicraft	68.86	30,939.00
Total	112.17	33,292.00

*Note.* Emploment is in lakh; export revenue is in crore of Indian rupees for year 2017

Indian craftspersons live in abject poverty (Gupta, 2011; Hepburn & Bolden, 2012). Majority of them belongs to backward castes, tribes and religious minority groups (like Muslim). Indian administrators urgently need to resolve issues related to the pathetic working conditions of Indian crafts persons, disappearing domestic markets, lower wages, lack of working capital, technological backwardness, artisan’s skill development and training, design improvement and preservation, lack of market information, need of health cover for craftspersons, scarcity of locally available raw material, lack of data on craft sector, unfair competition with machine products, organizational backwardness, lack of credit facility from banks, transportation costs, exploitation by middlemen, lack of artisan’s recognition, inequality in profit sharing and craft based caste rigidity (Abdul, 1996; Cable & Weston, 1982; Crafts Council of India, 2011; Gupta, 2011; Herman, 1956; Jain, 1986; Jaitly, 1994; Liebl & Roy, 2003; UNESCO & ITC, 1997).

Indian craft sector being marred with these challenges saw gradual fall in the total number of craftspersons in the handicrafts as well the handloom sector of India. In 1970 total handloom artisans were 124 lakh which in 1995 became 64 lakh and by 2010 only 44 lakh (Sundari, 2017). Timothy (Scrase, 2003) has cited an estimation by the United Nations that “in India over the past 30 years the numbers of artisans have declined by at least 30%. As per 2010 Indian handloom census around 35% handloom households reported that their children are not interested to take craft as occupation (Development Commissioner Handlooms & National Council of Applied Economic Research, 2010). This may have led (Tyabji, 2016) to estimate that on an average 10-15% craftspersons annually leaving occupation as craftsperson.

These concerns for the Indian craft sector are as old as the solutions suggested by the Indian state. Soumya Venkatesan (2009) found it problematic to see craftspersons as helpless, innocent, countrymen, saviour of culture and heritage, help-seeking and without any knowledge. She

lamented this romanticisation of Indian craft and craft producers. She argued that “an artisan whose objects do not sell has little incentive to continue producing them (p. 37).” It seems India still aims to revive craft sector with the emotional nostalgia of swadeshi movement. India invests sparsely to modernise the Indian craft sector through empowering the hand-skills of crafts persons.

Glenn Adamson (2007) reminded how in modern era craft has been “unfairly undervalued” given “second class status” by naming it feminine, ethnic and under the imperial rule the colonised craft based economies like India were labeled as static. As he noted:

It is positioned as fundamentally conservative, both in the positive and negative senses of the word. Progress is always located elsewhere—in political radicalism, machinery and technology, organizational structures—but never in skilled hands themselves. This attitude puts strict limits on craft.

He suggested to overcome from the 20th century perspective of seeing craft only as the craft by studying it from multiple disciplines like social history, anthropology and economics. As Glenn Adamson (2013) has argued we have to overcome from seeing craft as an “antidote” to modernity. He lamented the bifurcation of “an undifferentiated world of making ... into a set of linked binaries: craft/industry, freedom/alienation, tacit/explicit, hand/machine, traditional/progressive (2013, p. xiii).” Similarly sociologist Colin Campbell (2005, p. 25) called it a “manichean view” of production in which:

artist craftsman (or craftswoman) is still set against a division of labour that involves the separation of design and manufacture – a dichotomy that carries with it the implied, if not explicit, contrast between inalienable, humane, authentic and creative work, on the one hand, and purely mechanical, unfulfilling and alienating labour, on the other.

Sarah Kettley (2010) also explains the similar irony that “The more we attempt to define craft through these polarized frames, the more it slips away from us. ... we can think of craft as something that is fluid: as a process, as an object, and as a culture frame” (this view is similar to Glenn Adamson (2007) view of craft as a process an idea). She sees craft as “fluid” which can “shape” new technologies. We can no longer define craft just as handmade (Adamson, 2013; Kettley, 2010). If we go back to our “Horn OK please” anecdote, we can relate that this getting louder and louder horn of handmade in the craft sector may lead to “Handmade OK please” behaviour in which craft is called “craft” only when it is made by hands if not by impoverished-hands.

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## End Notes

1. <http://etsy.com/>, Etsy is a New York based online marketplace founded in 2005, for selling and buying "unique" "handmade" products. In 2016, it sold more than 35 million items (2.84 Billion USD) and generated a revenue of 365 Million USD, through its active 1.7 million sellers and 28.6 million buyers (Etsy, 2016).

2. *potayto, potahto* means "A negligible, trivial, or unimportant difference, distinction, or correction" (*The Free Dictionary*, 2017). This phrase came from a famous song "Let's call the whole thing off" by (Astaire & Rogers, 1937). And the song goes like this: "You like potato and I like potahto, You like tomato and I like tomahto, Potato, potahto, Tomato, tomahto. Let's call the whole thing off."