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CRAFT IN THE AGE OF TOURISM

TOURISM, if it is managed sensitively, can be a miraculous catalyst for economic and cultural revitalisation; it not only enhances income but also establishes an identity of the country. Two Asian countries—Thailand and India—are among the top ten destinations in the world, and tourists to India increase by almost 15 per cent each year.

The nature of tourism itself has changed—with tourists travelling for leisure and pleasure, rather than culture and architecture. This new type of traveller is often looking to buy ethnic crafts or souvenirs as a memento of their travel experience. Which crafts do visitors to India buy? Where do they buy them from? These are some of the questions to explore.

India has over twenty million craftspeople, who create a very wide range of varied crafts. Is it possible to productively use the ever-growing tourism industry to explore approaches to craft merchandising that will benefit and sustain the crafts community throughout the country? Let us analyse present trends in crafts production and sale in the tourism sector.

Popular Souvenirs from India

- Carpets and *durries*
- Kundan, silver and semi-precious jewellery
- Block-printed fabric
- Embroideries
- Folk art—Madhubani paintings, Bastar metal work
- Silk—material, garments, scarves and stoles
- Embossed and embroidered leather
- Pashmina shawls from Kashmir which continue to be the most popular



The market for crafts in the tourism sector is based on certain factors which it is important to understand and analyse in order to develop the market potential for crafts. A similar approach can be used to analyse other marketing options for crafts.

TOURISTS' PREFERENCES

- Air travel implies limited bulk and weight of luggage for travellers. So they prefer to carry small, light objects. Since weight is a major problem, the things that tourists buy have to be either unusual, or something that they don't get in their own country or so competitive in price that they find them irresistible.
- Today popular destinations in India are Goa and Kerala where visitors flock for the beaches and ayurvedic spas. Tourists also come to see monuments searching for a unique cultural experience like visiting the magnificent forts and palaces of Rajasthan. It is important to realise that trends, fashions, tastes and lifestyles change. This, in turn, affects the tourism and crafts industry.



- With cameras being so sophisticated, easy-to-use and inexpensive, tourists no longer need souvenirs just to put into showcases at home as reminders of their travels.
- International travel today is quite commonplace rather than a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. Tourists today are exposed to the best the world can offer, and are therefore more selective. The Indian experience shows that the traveller today—even backpackers—do have money to spend, but since they travel the globe, they are quite selective about what they spend their money on.
- Tourists these days are younger; they are usually professionals on holiday, rather than just the retired and the elderly. Their homes are smaller; usually colour-coordinated and designed to a theme. Just because something is ethnic it is not always desired by them. However, sometimes, simply changing a colour or size can make a traditional item into a best-seller.



Some years ago, weavers from Varanasi converted the traditional *dupatta* into a stole, a length of cloth worn like a small shawl by women in Western countries. This new product became very popular and sold well at tourist centres as it was light, the right size and comfortable to wear with western clothes.

- Today's travellers do not want things that are difficult to maintain, which require frequent washing and polishing. Hence, there was a sharp decline in recent years in the demand for Indian metal crafts like *bidri*, silver and brassware.

An English lady wanted to buy a white *chikan* tablecloth—but the thought of hand laundering, starching and ironing its fragile, heavily embroidered muslin folds worried her. Finally, she had a brainwave. "I'll buy it for my mother-in-law," she said. "She will like the tablecloth and my good taste, but she will have the headache of looking after it for the rest of her life!"

- On the other hand tourists and travellers do buy clothes and accessories for holidays—casuals, sandals, cloth bags, jewellery. These items are usually cheaper in India than in Europe and America. Tourists today are much less conservative and enjoy experimenting

with local styles. Holiday clothes and accessories are, therefore, areas that could be developed.

- Visitors would prefer to invest in and to take home truly beautiful artistic objects. This area of artistic, high-quality products needs to be developed rather than trying to sell poorly designed, cheap, outdated souvenirs of the past.

POPULAR SALES OUTLETS FOR CRAFTS

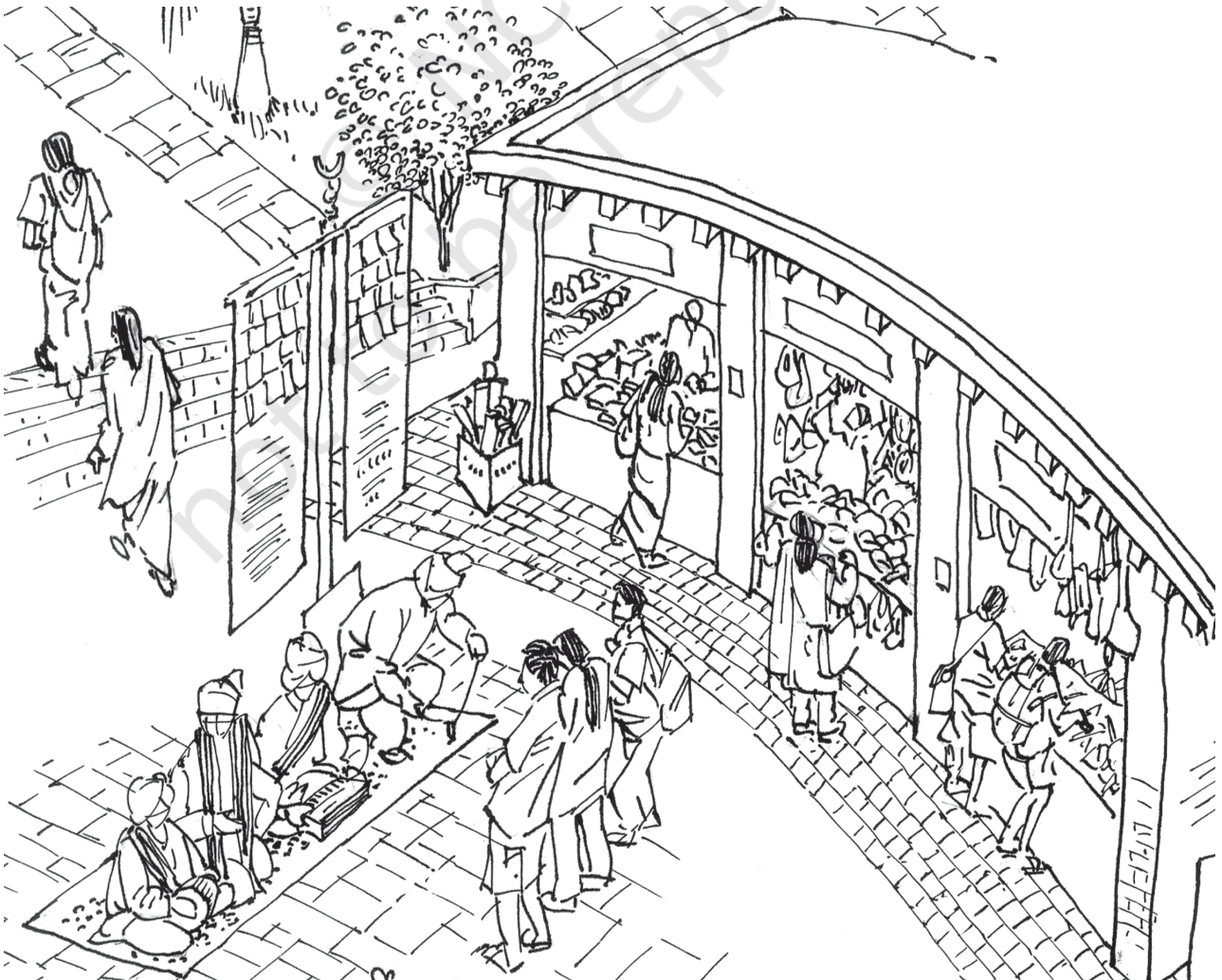
Most tourists visit the Taj Mahal, one of the most beautiful monuments in the world. However, this world famous heritage site is surrounded by hundreds of little shops and stalls full of cheap alabaster and ugly plastic replicas of the Taj, rows and rows of small soap-stone pill boxes with poor quality marble inlay and lids that don't fit. The shops are run by aggressive and persistent shopkeepers and there is not a craftsman or genuine craft object in sight. The same is true of all our great tourist sites, museums and pilgrimage centres—the Red Fort, Khajuraho, Ajanta, Varanasi, Hampi, Mathura, Mahabalipuram and the beaches of Goa and Orissa.



There are government-run Cottage Industries and State Handicraft Emporia in all the cities. Baba Kharak Singh Marg in Delhi has a row of crafts emporia run by the State Handicrafts Corporations' shops. These emporia were an innovation as India was probably the first country with a policy and a Ministry for Handlooms and Handicrafts.

A comparatively new trend is privately run shops in cities, hotels and airports. Commercial tourist complexes market a mix of ethnic food, rural lifestyle, craft, music and dance such as Vishaala in Gujarat, Swabhumi in Kolkata, Chowki Dhani in Jaipur. The crafts person is featured as both exhibit and entertainer.

In order to enter the field of handicraft marketing one has to know where and how the products are made, appreciate the craftsmen's lifestyle and method of working. Thereafter, reliable supply contacts or procurement arrangements should be established, as well as efficient distribution outlets, and the whole enterprise managed

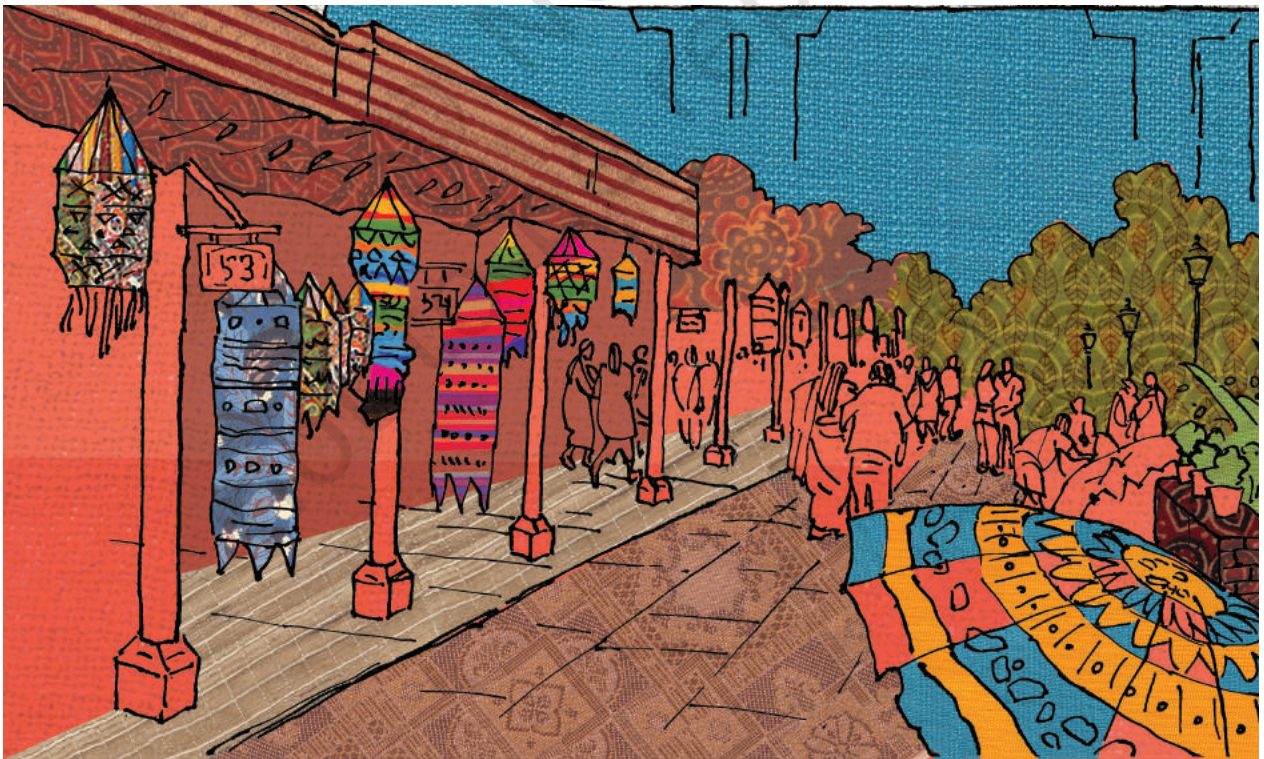


in a business-like way. In the selection process, good taste and visual discrimination are valuable assets, besides a general understanding of crafts. Working out realistic cost prices with a reasonable mark-up for retail and wholesale prices are among the basic steps for proper marketing.

NEW AVENUES FOR CRAFTS DEVELOPMENT

Crafts, in tourism, does not just mean selling things to tourists. It could also mean crafting the spaces that tourists use such as the hotels, guest houses, restaurants and scenic spots. Crafts of all kinds—architectural, functional, decorative, can be used to enhance and accent these places. This way local craft skills can be promoted and sustained in the long term.

Devigarh, Neemrana, Samode and other listed Heritage Hotels in Rajasthan and elsewhere have no hotel arcades, no stereotyped craft souvenirs but every room, surface, and object in the hotel has been handcrafted in the best traditional techniques and with the best contemporary designs.



Museums are a wonderful venue for selling quality crafts to a discerning audience. The few museums that have shops only have a small set of badly produced postcards and some dusty plaster casts.

Airport shops are another significant venue to capture customers for local handicrafts. As this is the last impression visitors have of India before they return home it is important that airport shops help them to forge a lasting and endearing image of our country.

Dilli Haat, the government crafts bazaar in the centre of Delhi, is now being replicated all over India. It is a wonderful opportunity for craftspeople to become aware of consumer tastes and trends, and for urban middle-class consumers to learn about the huge range of regional craft skills, materials and techniques. This type of crafts bazaar brings craftspeople from all over India, allows them to sell their own products; the programme of crafts changes every fortnight so as to be interesting all the year round, bringing fresh products to new audiences in the city.

Natural and cultural heritage sites can become a catalyst and an inspiration for change. It is possible that such places can become craft production centres where wonderful new crafts by craftspeople and designers are developed, inspired by the historical site. There has been some work done in this direction in Mahabalipuram in Tamil Nadu and Konark in Orissa where skilled young craftspeople train, and produce wonderful new pieces inspired by the monuments. Organised craft fairs, and craft demonstrations in local hotels also link tourism to local traditions without exploitation. Tourists can contribute to craft development and social development initiatives at such tourist centres. Eco-tourism must be an enhancing experience for the community, not only for the tourist.



In Ranthambhore, Rajasthan, hundreds of villagers were displaced by the creation of the Tiger Reserve. Tourists, frustrated by the lack of entertainment in between visits to the Wild Life Park, used to go off in their jeeps to the villages with their cameras, disrupting the villagers' daily routines and often offending them with their holiday clothes. Traditional rural hospitality rapidly turned into reverse exploitation: children began begging for presents, villagers started asking tourists for money when they were photographed. A Craft Centre outside the Tiger Reserve was set up employing hundreds of local rural women. The Centre developed crafts for the tourist market around locally available traditional materials. The Centre attracted tourists who could come there, interact with craftspeople, see, understand and buy crafts in a natural yet regulated environment.

HOW CRAFTS DECLINED WITH TOURISM

Kashmir is a State whose entire economy was based on tourism and craft. For well over a century it was the most important tourist destination—for Indian as well as foreign tourists. Almost every family in the Kashmir Valley was in the handicrafts business in some way, either making or selling crafts—carpets, shawls, crewel and *kani* embroidery, jewellery, papier-mâché, and carved walnut wood, silver and beaten copper items.

The tourist market was so large and constant that no attempt was made to sustain the local market or adapt the crafts to local consumer needs and budgets. Over the past two centuries, crafts originally designed for local consumption, like the ornamentally carved Kashmiri ceilings made of walnut wood, and the traditional *pherans* and shawls worn by Kashmiris with heavy embroidery were gradually reduced to souvenirs and gift items aimed at the tourist trade.

A classic example is papier mâché originally developed to make light, decorative furniture and home accessories for ordinary homes in Kashmir. The papier mâché art was used to make simple products for the tourist market such as pill and powder boxes, coasters and napkin rings, and Christmas tree decorations, embellished with western motifs of cats, bells and snowflakes.

Two decades of conflict have made Kashmir a dangerous area for tourists. Foreign tourists no longer travel in large numbers to Kashmir, and its craftspeople have been deeply affected and the whole economy, dependent on tourism, has suffered enormously.

So linked were these crafts with tourism and the beauty of the Valley that the same products marketed outside this troubled state, by displaced Kashmiri craftspeople in hotel arcades, footpaths and markets in other states, just did not sell as well.

A strategy to revitalise and find new consumers and usages for Kashmiri crafts is urgently required. It is a warning that no craft should become too dependent on any one market—particularly international tourism.





CRAFTS AND SURVIVAL

In contrast, Kutch in Gujarat is an example of how crafts have repeatedly been an instrument of dynamic economic survival and revival.

In Kutch as in Kashmir, almost everyone is a craftsperson. Products made here range from everyday terracotta objects to fabulous jewellery and embroideries. Formerly this craft was a way of life, made for household embellishment in poor rural communities. It was the terrible six-year drought in the 1980s that made people realise the potential of the skills they possessed. In an otherwise drought-prone desert environment with little to attract visitors, Kutch used its rich craft heritage to generate tourism. Today, every household is dependent in some way on the production and sale of craft. Apart from sale of products, specialised craft tours are organised to cater to visitors' interests in vegetable dye, block-printing or embroidery techniques.

When, in 2001, Kutch was struck by a devastating earthquake an estimated 80,000 people lost their lives, and over 2,28,000 artisans were severely affected by the quake, losing their families, their homes, and their livelihoods.

Once again crafts came to the rescue. Craftspeople, without insurance, pensions, provident funds, were, ironically, the first to recover from the trauma of the earthquake, thanks to their inherent skills. Their buyers, international tour operators and even students and back-packers, came loyally to their rescue, sending in not just orders, but funds for earthquake relief, reconstruction, craft development projects, and help in many ways. Today the crafts communities of Kutch have re-established their crafts and their markets.

One tourist, hearing of the earthquake and remembering the crafts and creativity of the community and the colours of her visits to Kutch, sent a crate full of scissors and needles for distribution!

NEW TRENDS IN CRAFT DEVELOPMENT

India is a fast-growing economy and needs to find a prominent place for its crafts in the global market. In this process of economic development the crafts communities need to be involved in finding new and innovative ways to help their craft to survive, as they are creative people with many ideas and have adapted to many changes over the years.

Catering for a Variety of Tastes: Tourism does not imply just European and American tourists. More and more Asians of all levels of society are travelling both within their own country and to neighbouring nations—generating new markets and new consumers.

Promoting Cultural Values: Craft development should be a means to promote cultural wisdom and family values. Showing respect to crafts communities should also be a part of our concerns. It is important to bring them and their needs into the consultative process when planning craft promotion.

Organic and Sustainable: Today the world is threatened by global warming, pollution, unhealthy living conditions and destruction of the environment. Conscientious tourists have now begun to ask if products have been grown organically, and whether the crafts process and production are sustainable in terms of the environment.

There are many crafts that are not based on sound environmental principles. Crafts production is in itself not always eco-friendly. Dyes and mordants pollute rivers; wood-based skills denude our forests. Leather tanning is accompanied by noxious smells and chemicals. Metal crafts and glass smelting are practised in appallingly hazardous and life-threatening surroundings.



There are items like ivory and sandalwood whose sale is restricted, protected animal skins and parts the sale of which is completely banned. Tourists, both foreign and domestic, must be informed why these products are not for sale and of the national effort to save India's wildlife and forests.

When encouraging and promoting crafts, attempt should be made to improve the working environment of craftspeople and to find new, innovative ways to protect natural resources, farm renewable resources like trees and bamboo, reduce pollution, and the exploitation of nature. Crafts that follow sustainable practice, that are organic and that do not exploit human beings should be clearly marked and labelled so that the growing conscientious market is well served by the Indian crafts industry.

Natural and Handmade: Today, 'handloom', 'handmade', 'natural dyed', 'natural fibres' are the Asian equivalents of designer labels. This is what India is especially famous for and for this we need to protect our reputation and never sell something as natural dyed or 100 per cent pure cotton if it is not.



Brand India: We Can Learn from Swiss Watches

Each nation has a unique brand identity, with its core values and essence diffusing through the population, who in turn reinforces and spreads these values and cultural nuances in a gigantic circle of brand building. No two nations are exactly the same, for a nation's identity comes from its languages, music, art, style, customs and religions.

Most successful watch brands derive their brand equity from being Swiss-made. Japanese products are associated with quality and innovation. Negative associations also transfer. Chinese branded products, top quality or not, are generally not perceived as such.

At present India's image is somewhat fragmented, ranging from cultural associations built by the 'Incredible India' tourism campaign, to a global fascination with the vibrancy of 'Bollywood', from the widespread poverty highlighted in the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, to the business perception of India as the world's back office. India needs to define its core values and national identities clearly, and purposefully build greater natural brand equity and value.

– Extracted from an article in *The Times of India*, 21 June 2009,
by PAUL TEMPORAL, Visiting Fellow at Said Business
School, University of Oxford

- **Transport and Monetary Transactions:** Traditional sandalwood carvings, miniature paintings and metalware are no longer as popular as before. Handcrafted furniture and furnishings, however, because they are so much cheaper than in the West, are a new growth area. When tourists see a long-term investment, they are ready to have their purchases shipped. It is important to be aware of the transport facilities available, licenses, duties, and import and export restrictions. The use of the credit card also means that tourists are no longer restricted by foreign exchange regulations or traveller's cheques or bank balance.
- **Design** is an aspect of craft that is often ignored and not invested in. Craft has always been changing and re-inventing itself, and it must respond to the shifts in society and lifestyles. If it remains static, it gradually withers away and dies. Sadly, however, though craftspeople in India still do the most incredible carving, embroidery, metal work, and inlay work in a host of different regional traditions and materials, product design has not kept pace with contemporary trends and styling.

Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines have been much more innovative and clever in adapting their traditional skills to crafts products that are both picturesquely Asian yet contemporary.

- **Presentation and Packaging** is one of the weakest areas in the Indian crafts chain. Even products aimed specifically at tourists do not have travel-proof carrier bags or packing material. This is particularly sad when there are so many natural materials which lend themselves so appropriately for packaging. Similarly, despite our Asian aesthetic sense and warmth, shop display and customer service in tourist centres are generally unattractive.

Well-designed information posters and labelling also help to sell products. The buyer must know and be informed which products are hand-woven, made of natural fibres, part of a historic cultural tradition, or made by tribal women. This information is as valuable as the product for today's eco-minded traveller.



EXERCISE

1. Choose a craft for which your state is famous and describe how you could develop this craft for the tourism sector. Why do you think it would be popular amongst tourists? Where would you market it? How would you package it?
2. Prepare the text and illustrations for a brochure on a craft—explaining its unique qualities, its sustainable properties and the community that made it, keeping in mind its value as a part of new trends and concerns of contemporary life.
3. Draw from the story of Kashmir that was over-dependent on foreign tourists and did not develop a domestic market, and relate it to how any craft in your area has been seriously affected and the reasons for this.
4. Find three new venues for the sale of crafts in your area. Identify places that you think would attract both domestic and foreign visitors and explain why.
5. “Tourists today do not travel to see ancient monuments. They travel seeking leisure and fun. Taking home mementos or curios is no longer high on their agenda.” Do you agree? Elaborate.

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