

Development of Design and Technique In Handicrafts

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Here is all the mystique of handicrafts as also a lot of haul en comonsense based on years of experience organising the Potters Industrial Co-operative at Dharavi, Bombay, which- much to the annoyance of the organis- ers has need become a showpiece for the nation.

An account. of the Prajapati Sahakari Utpadak Mandal the Potters Industrial Co-opetative appeared in an earlier issue of this paper (see Progress of Pottery as a Handicraft , issue of March 10, 1956)

HANDICRAFTS have come to exercise an appeal of a sort, which may be termed 'fascination' over the leaders of fashion in particular and the upper strain as a point of reaction to the monotony of utilitarian machine made goods. The folk element in traditional handicrafts with its many local variations and rough, picturesque undertones, make them look 'cute' 'interesting', 'unusual' and at times even 'exquisite' in the eyes of the cosmopolitan gentefolk and art-lovers residing in cities and larger towns, who form the new democratic elite. Apart from this elite, even the common folk find interest in handicrafts because they vaguely sense an element of 'Indian'-ness in them, which accords well with the new 'Indian'-ness which they themselves have acquired as citizens of Independent India. This Indian quality, this indigenous character, is not, a new aspect of handicrafts; but in the wake of Independent, it has found greater recognition. So, handicrafts have become a part of the new order of things. The great curiosity and interest shown by foreigners in the new Indian nation, and in things Indian has also helped.

Thus, apart from the general appeal of Swadeshi movement, which principally aims at self-sufficiency and larger employment, as pursued by the Khadi and Village Industries Board, handicrafts have stood out on their own and have an independent, appeal. In the excitement caused by appreciation of Indian handicrafts at home and abroad the latter is a subject of great fascination to many lovers of handicrafts who see in it a dollar-mine for this poor hut ambitious nation), some individuals and bodies have been impelled to scour the country for specimens, of handicrafts as also paper or block designs lying idle in craftsmen's homes. These processes, methods, designs etc. employed by old and present day craftsmen art-being studied. Attempts are being

made to revive old production units or set up new ones at various centres. These explorations have borne quite good and fruitful results and have helped to bring about a clearer understanding of the problems and the province of handicrafts. The State has also been inspired by all this excitement to shoulder responsibility for supporting this quite noble field of endeavour in addition to a general patronage of handicrafts. In the last few years there has been set up an All India Handicrafts' Board, functioning first under the Ministry of Commerce & Industries and now under the Ministry of Production of the Union Government, which is an advisory body made up of non-officials and officials, presided over by Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, to assist the Centre to formulate and execute schemes for aiding and reviving handicrafts in different centres.

Design Centres for Handicrafts

All this interest, exploration, study and effort have resulted in many activities in the nature of exhibitions, expositions, emporiums, export drives etc. to popularise handicrafts and market their products at home and abroad. But, as these activities have widened, the need has been felt for more serious effort to place some of the basic Indian handicrafts on a sound footing, so that regular production of selected articles may take place in organised production units for steady supply to well-defined markets. A necessary preliminary to it is the development of design and technique in accordance with modern needs and technical knowledge. For this purpose, it is proposed to set up central and regional Design Centres.

The idea of these Design Centres, as far as I understand, appears to be as follows: It is proposed that a Design Centre will undertake, with the assistance of several artists and artisans (master-craftsmen), employed full time, to plan and execute designs and prepare sample-articles

for a number of important crafts. These designs, with all necessary specifications, will then be passed on to practising artisans to enable them to undertake production of these selected products for the market. The team in charge of the Design Centre is supposed to appraise itself of uses and tastes favoured by a modern society, chiefly of city dwellers, and to direct the centre to do research in old and new designer and techniques in order to prepare good samples of well-designed articles in the workshop, by a certain amount of experimentation where necessary. These samples, as mentioned above, are to be circulated among different production units- in the country (some of which may be functioning while new ones may have to be started with the assistance of various State Governments) Both the All India Handicrafts Board and the newly formed All India Handloom Board have plans, I believe, to set up such Design Centres in the near future.

Planned Production

The chief business (at least at the present stage) of the Design Centres will be to guide individual artisans or groups of them in undertaking the production of well-designed and well-specified articles for the modern market. The Design Centre, will do the spade work by way of research and experiment in the preparation of designs and samples and the work of the practising craftsmen in the country at present will be cut out to executing such designs in planned production. They will be spared the initial hard toil of working out new designs or reorienting old ones and all the teamwork for study, research etc. which it involves. There is also the question of adequate building and equipment necessary for carrying out such work which requires considerable finance which the State can easily put in, but not the artisans, even in groups. It is not clear at present whether it will be the business of the Design Centre to assign tools, implements and other equip-

ment Also for different crafts. Evidently they will have to furnish artisan-units with written instructions on any new methods or processes (worked out by the Design Centre) which may be involved in the promotion of the samples issued out by them.

The U P Industries' Department have had some designing of this kind carried out for them by the Lucknow School of Arts. They have after that circulated actual sample pieces amongst artisan-centres from whom they got production according to the sample and given specifications. Now this seems a way, and probably quite a good way, to improve and reorientate designs and the necessary technique in the field of handicrafts towards certain given ends. If efficiently conducted, such Design Centres may very well fulfil the need of supplying well-conceived 'beauty in utility' designs to artisan-groups to undertake profitable and even creditable production of handicrafts for a modern market. Even modern big industry is availing itself of Design Sections in its factories for some such purpose for its own large-scale production.

Design and Craft are One

It is true that at present the artisans and craftsmen are *not in* any way organised and have generally speaking no idea of what they have to do if their crafts are to survive. The Sreni or guild system of old with its tradition of apprenticeship is gone. There is neither organisation nor living tradition to harmonise and control the activities of artisans and guide them towards a creative end, though through long traditional usage some isolated groups are still carrying out beautiful work and talent is not entirely jacking even. In the ordinary artisan groups who survive by catering to a demand which has not been quite supplanted by modern equivalents. But shorn of tradition, the work of artisans everywhere has tended to be a very tawdry and a slavish imitation of modern tinfoil things at their worst. Under these circumstances, it appears obvious that without new initiative injected from the outside, they cannot undertake the task of re-orienting their designs to suit the requirements of the times in which they are living. Ignorant, and unorganised as they are, they cannot be expected either to take the initiative or secure the resources *on* their own to meet this challenge. Also it appears quite reasonable that the

State is the proper agency to undertake an effort of such large scope, demanding considerable expenditure.

Granted all these, yet the approach presented by the Design Centres, as they are currently conceived, is a fragmentary way of tackling handicrafts, whose nature is basic and complex and demands consonance with its creative spirit. A mass-scale industry is chiefly involved in manipulation for efficiency and therefore it can afford to fragment its processes into separate departments. But by their very nature, handicrafts

are concurrent expressions of the potentiality of Man and Material and therefore in hand crafts, these processes must, be related at the basic level. Development of design and technique cannot be attempted in isolation, even from the most aesthetic ends in view and in the best conceived plan of study and research.

Handicrafts by their very name emphasise the hands and their creative role. The development of design or technique cannot be attempted separately from the development of the artisan's mind and its capacity

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to understand the comprehensive task to which it sets itself. Though the artisan's understanding appears to be intuitive and impulsive when actively functioning yet it represents a stage of comprehension for him of his own personality and the 'personality' of the material which he handles and of the interdependence of the two. The artisan does not manipulate the material to a given end in the most efficient manner possible but he works to express, in however humble a manner, the potentialities of the material which he handles as the medium and through which he seeks an expression of himself. This dual hi-polar interaction of Man and Material is the very basis of the handicrafts. It therefore results in the simultaneous growth of design and technique as the related dimensions of creative expression and effective manipulation.

Tool—An Extension of the Hand

The tool for the craftsman is an extension of his own hand, his own active and responsive personality. It is unlike the machine which is an instrument of a set purpose, or concept of the mind, temporarily formulated for execution. In the same way design for the craftsman is an expression of his own desire and understanding in relation to the material he handles and at the same time a response to the desire and understanding of his fellow men, which he senses through his own. In that way, a handicraft becomes the effective expression of a community's experience and needs. The initiative must always remain, therefore, with the practising craftsman in dealing with design and technique in his craft. If he is not ready to exercise this initiative, he must be assisted and propelled towards exercising it. This, therefore, should be the task a Design Centre should set to itself, in order to release the artisan and craftsman communities from the bemused state of arrested growth in which they find themselves today.

The craftsman must necessarily possess a mobile personality within the limitations of his own individual faculties and the stage of development of the craft to which the community has reached; his is an organic development and so is that of his craftsmanship. If he has become immobilised, he must be helped once again to regain his mobility. This can be done by those who are more alive than he is to his craft, by those who may have better aesthetic appreciation of crafts. Artists, there-

fore, can help him as any other person with creative understanding and wide experience. But in essence it is he who is to be set back in the stream so that time and its spirit are assimilated by the artisan as a responsive and creative agent and craft once again becomes a living thing. If this is not done, an understanding of modern needs and modern techniques, as they are teamed, will only be arbitrary, external criteria that would result in creating styles and fashions, which are brittle and will be set aside for the latest fancy or fad. That is how fashions change and decay in a most discontinuous manner. But crafts need a continuity of inspiration and expression even though very radical changes do occur in the patterns of expression, from the great conflicts of spirit and time in history.

Nothing Mystic in it

The last two paragraphs may appear to be an inebriate poetic digression, unsuited to the practical nature of the problem in hand. But it is not so. Experience shows that every basic problem has to be tackled on its own grounds, even in order to achieve the most practical and concrete results. The fact is that, people here and elsewhere are turning to handicrafts because they appear as organic and intimate expressions of man's needs; because they are fresh and unregimented; because they bespeak the work of Man, the producer, confidently making things for Man, the consumer, who are both kinsmen and should know each other.

When the purely external fascination of handicrafts as cute, avant-garde things subsides as it must some day, then handicrafts can stand their ground only by fulfilling their own natural function. If they do not prepare to do so, they must give way to factory-made things, which are at least what they profess to be.

Design has three elements: form, texture and ornament which are closely related to one another and to the Material in hand. Technique, which is the effective manipulation of productive mechanism to carry out design on the material, consists of the tools, processes and the understanding of technical sequence i.e. maturity effected by proper observation of time-intervals in the manipulation of tools and processes. These two must therefore always be developed in such a way that the artisan who applies them remains mobile in his understanding and his creativity.

It follows, therefore, that the Design Centre has to be a Craft Centre. Where craftsmen and artists, who want to become craft-artists, will work together in the midst of an active craftsman community, whose productive activities must always remain compulsively in view while the team in the Craft Centre develops design. Of course designs have to be developed in close conjunction with techniques, assimilating all the characteristic achievements in the craft in hand as practised in the region of its origin and responding at the same time to the stimulus of new achievements effected in a larger or even an alien region.

Even though such a fundamental view of development: seems to entail a tremendous expenditure of time, in practice it has been found that a workable basis is attained in a pretty short time and at considerably less expense than would be involved in conducting a Design Centre merely to supply good designs to artisans. Because the research and experiments are carried out from a working craftsman's angle, the problems at once resolve themselves into manageable proportions and appear in their proper perspective. At the same time, the effects which are to be achieved present a clear and concrete pattern of development, one leading out of another.

There is also another aspect to development of the elements of craftsmanship in this manner. When anything definite is achieved, it is easily intelligible to any interested member of the craftsmen's colony and acts as a natural stimulus to him. Also the practical transformation of effective research into actual production takes place very naturally and easily when practising craftsmen are around to carry it out. Sampling of markets is also easily done when those who maintain themselves by their craft are there to carry freshly designed and finished things to consumers who are daily approached anyway.

An experiment on these lines has been carried out successfully by the All-India Handicrafts' Board, who have set up a Craft Centre in the potters' colony at Dharavi, Bombay. The Potters' Industrial Co-operative at Dharavi work this centre themselves on behalf of the Board and with financial assistance from the Board. In two years, remarkable results have been achieved in all the branches of the development *fit* the craft.