

Development of Local Arts and Crafts a Case Study of Sikkim

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Abstract

It has been detailed here that the tribal handicrafts were in a better time very rich in quality, if not always in variety. Their arts and crafts saw a rise during the Tibetan regime in Sikkim, when they got constant inspiration and supply of raw materials from Tibet. This changed with the souring of Sino-Indian relations after 1960s. Further changes occurred with the final merger of Sikkim into India in 1975. On the one hand, the expansion of administrative machineries and other institutions attracted a large number of outsiders who later became potential consumers of the local products. On the other, the quality deteriorated in the process of large-scale production. The artisans, for various reasons, now feel discouraged to continue. Lacking is any attempt to build a resource-base within the State.

Introduction

The terms 'arts' and 'crafts' do not differ much in meaning. Aesthetics is the soul of the both, but still a subtle difference may be drawn here. An art is purely a creation and expression of beauty. A craft is also largely so but it has an additional connotation-occupation. Though both these words are quite arbitrarily used in the present paper, what we see today as

It is quite well known that India was once famous all over the world for its arts and crafts, but this glorious tradition has more or less discontinued, mainly for exogenous factors like the British colonisation in India. These are more or less decadent in most parts of India. In Sikkim, the 22nd State of India, happily, an effort is being made to revive them very recently.

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Sikkim is one of the smallest and most backward States of India. It was outside India until April, 1975. It lies between 27° 10' and 28° 10' north latitude and 88° 4' and 88° 58' east longitude. The total area is about **4508 square kms**, surrounded by Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and West Bengal on the north, west, east and south respectively¹.

Origin

Regarding the early forms of the Sikkimese arts, Madanjeet Singh writes that "the earliest known art forms in Sikkim do not go back before the 15th-16th century A. D. These are rather crude carvings in relief placed upon *chhortens* (receptables of worship) . . . The first *chhortens* were built after Tibetan models and other shapes were fixed by definite measurements and design. The earliest stone reliefs used for outer decoration of *chhortens* go back to a period before Phuntsog Namgyal (born 1604 A. D., who was the first ruler of Sikkim)"². This statement

shows that there existed some arts and crafts in Sikkim even before the Tibetan immigration to this place. The local knowledgeable also recall that the Lepchas who were one of the oldest inhabitants of Sikkim and were animists, made idols and images of different gods and goddesses and worshipped them. It was only after they had been converted to Buddhist religion that this practice was supposed to have been given up, at least officially.

Continuity and Change

Today, with Central assistance in respect of finance and technology, the State is galloping ahead, not only in the agricultural sector but also in the industrial sector. In the agricultural field, High Yielding Variety Seeds, Oil Seeds and other commercial crops like potato, ginger, cardamom, peaches, and plums are being cultivated with technical training to the people at the same time³. In the industrial sector, the Government Food Preservation Factory, H. M. T. Factory, Distillery, etc., are a few examples of industrial development of Sikkim. Incentives are also being given to the local people to develop local and cottage industries⁴.

Apparently there has been a drastic change in the local arts and crafts of Sikkim, which make many people talk of the change in terms of modernity and tradition, but such a dichotomisation may not be still appropriate in the area under discussion because we still find some characteristics of both tradition and modernity in them.

The change can be observed from a few sample pieces at the residence of Bermek Kazi (the Ex-councillor to His Highness, the late Chogyal). The earlier carvings on wood were, for example, much deeper and subtler than the carvings seen today in the market. The carpets were also of much superior quality, both in designs and in the materials used. It

was perhaps due partly to the availability of better materials then from Tibet. The colours used earlier for paintings were made out of tree barks or plants, but today they use modern chemical paints produced in the factories. Moreover, there was no time limit for the preparation of a particular article but today the articles are produced after a fair calculation of the cost benefit ratio.

Changes are, however, only one aspect of the story: the continuity is another. Though the colours are prepared out of chemical materials, people do not use all colours. They use only the prescribed ones. Each of the colours used has some religious significance. The most common pictures carved, or woven, also have some religious significance, such as *dhug* or parasol, *pema* or lotus, *pel-behu* or eternal knot, *ser-nya* or golden fishes, *gyaltsen* or victory banner, *tar-chen-bhum-pa* or vase, *dhum-kar-yel-ke* or conch shell, *khor-lo* or sacred wheel, dragons, elephants, etc.

Similarly, other pictures carved on wood or woven on carpets have some religious significance. It would be therefore wrong to conceive of the change in a dichotomous model from tradition to modernity. In fact there has been found a smooth blend of both.

Articles Produced and Market Facilities

The following are the main articles produced in Sikkim :—

- (a) *Thangkas* or paintings of divinities, or group of divinities, on silk cloth.
- (b) Carpets, with different coloured pictures woven on them.
- (c) Cane works for decorative purposes.
- (d) Multicrafts like doll making, handbags, toyships and toy aeroplanes.
- (e) Woodcrafts in the following shapes:
 - i. Table or *choktse*.
 - c. Almirah

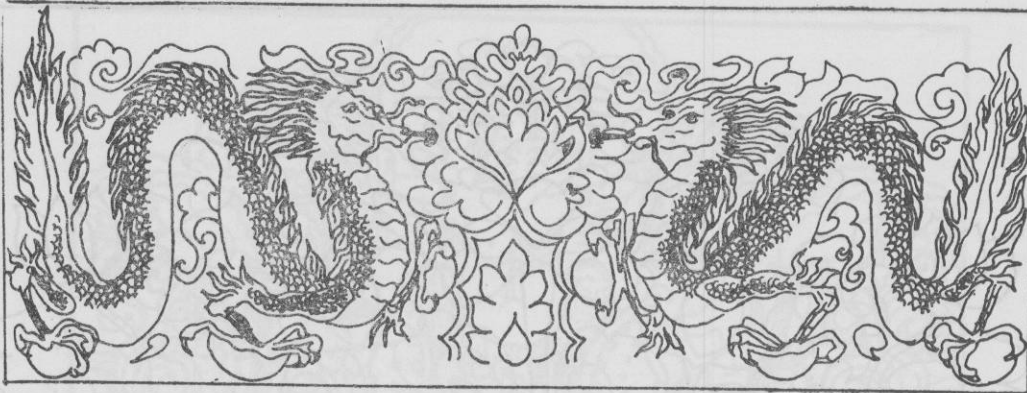


Fig. 1

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|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| ii. Sofa-sets
or <i>bhodin</i> . | vi. Drawers. |
| iii. Screens. | vii. Lamp stands. |
| iv. Altars or
<i>cheosum</i> . | viii. Wall decorations. |

Beautifully carved or woven designs mentioned above are seen on these articles. Since they look really beautiful there is usually no problem of marketing. Regarding the 'thangkas' the present Governor of Sikkim, Mr. Taleyarkhan, writes that "Thangka painting... is a renowned art of Sikkim. The thangka works of master craftsmen sell for thousands of rupees abroad. They work in seclusion in remote villages"⁶. Other articles are sold in the show rooms in Delhi or Gangtok. Most of the articles are produced against advance orders from the Military officers, tourists and the local aristocrats. Foreign tourists are still restricted entry into this State for strategic reasons. The marketing of goods produced in the Government Institute of Cottage Industries (GICI) is channelised through the Institute only. The private entrepreneurs produce goods in small numbers, and these are usually against advance orders.

Resource Management

Resource here means both human and physical. The human resource is by

and large managed by the GICI with the help of some supervisors. However, there are a few private entrepreneurs who also employ a few workers. They manage the raw materials from different sources, whereas the GICI does it through the Public Relations Departments of the Government. At first, quotations are invited through the Public Relations Department and, once the tender is accepted, the materials are brought in with the help of the State Trading Corporation of Sikkim. Raw materials like wool are usually brought from Ludhiana, while wood and cotton are either procured locally or brought from the neighbouring State of West Bengal. The supply of finished products is also done through the State Trading Corporation only.

Before the Sino-Indian rivalry wool and silk used to be brought from Tibet, which were of high quality. The only article that is locally available now is wood. Despite large reserved forests in Sikkim it often becomes difficult to procure it locally. Attempts are being made to avail all the necessary raw materials locally.

Economics of Arts and Crafts in Sikkim

The development of arts and crafts in Sikkim shows a close link with the



Fig. 2

development of the general economy of the region. Though the history of the arts and crafts of Sikkim is as old as the history of Sikkim itself, it did not receive much attention of the outsiders such as the British, initially. Previously land was plenty and the population was very low. Agriculture was the mainstay of a majority of the peoples. The crafts as a part of occupation was, however, followed in the North District where, due to climatic factors, agriculture did not hold much importance. But with the gradual increase in the population due to immigration as well as natural population growth it became impossible for agriculture to accommodate all the people.

The traditional handicrafts of Sikkim received a serious setback following the Sino-Indian rivalry of 1962. These crafts were virtually abandoned as the import of raw materials, like wool and silk were stopped from Tibet. Therefore, State patronage became very much imperative in order to sustain and develop the arts and crafts of Sikkim. The establishment of the GICI at Gangtok in 1957 and the

starting of technical training in the Institute's premises was a landmark in the industrial history of Sikkim. But despite such patronage the arts and crafts did not develop much until 1977-78. But then in 1975 Sikkim had joined the Indian Union which flooded this new State with so much capital that an inflationary trend was clearly visible. This inflow of money indirectly contributed to the development of the arts and crafts of Sikkim.

In the process of rapid development of Sikkim with the capital and technical guidance from the Indian experts, many people from outside got employment despite the policy of the State Government to discourage the outsiders. Hardly any Sikkimese who had studied upto class VIII perhaps had to remain unemployed. This increased the purchasing power of the people of Gangtok which was the centre of development. This resulted in a rapid development of the arts and crafts of Sikkim.

The paradox of development is, however, interesting to note. On the one hand, the arts and crafts have a traditional



Fig. 3

and religious values and, on the other, the techniques in the same have been secularised considerably. On the whole, this has taken a market or commercial orientation. Sociologically this can be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the social system to adapt to the chang-

ing situation. It is an economic adaptation of the part to the society as a whole.

Exploitation

The developments outlined above have been accompanied by some unhappy developments also. These are, mainly,

exploitation and alienation. Of the two, the former cannot be totally accepted, because the workers' version cannot be taken as final, nor the official one. Both sides somewhat exaggerate their views. For example, according to the calculations of the workers, the Institute makes a profit of 42.86% per article, as is clear from the following examples

Table, medium size, length=2'2", breadth=15" and height=18"

Wages of the craftsmen.....	Rs. 55.
Fitting charge paid to the carpenter....	
.....	Rs. 35.
Painting charges	Rs. 25.
Cost of Paints and other raw materials including Wood.....	Rs. 60.
Total	Rs. 175.

Market price of the table=Rs. 250.
Profit=250-175=75 or 42.86%.

The above table gives only the one-sided view of the workers. The Institute which has to manage the whole shop have their own difficulties to mention. They have to provide the raw materials and keep the laboures employed throughout the year but the tourist season extends for a quarter of an year or so only. They have to bear the loss if the articles are accidentally damaged while transporting. They also have to finance the marketing and advertising cost.

Alienation

There is a general consensus of the peoples regarding the superiority of the articles produced earlier than those produced now. Previously the article had more of religious value which urged them to produce the best they could but now the quality of the articles is deteriorating, a fact which can be attributed to the division of labours and the lack of identi-

fication of the workers with their work. Today the cost-benefit analysis of economics rules the game. All these have resulted in the deterioration of the quality of the arts and crfts of Sikkim.

Many of the workers were found aware of this dual crisis but did not have any positive alternative in their mind. Some of them thought that better working facilities would be helpful while others had a higher wage in mind. Their wages are same (Rs. 10-15 per day) as the wage of a coolie in a construction work but much higher than the wage of an agricultural labourer. With such a technical training the wage is still quite low but they get the work almost throughout the year while the coolies or agricultural labourers do not. The workers are not satisfied with the prevailing rate of wages but have not raised their voice strongly till now. This passive state of their being is perhaps better explained if their socio-economic background is depicted here briefly.

Family Background :

Out of 15 informants met in the GICI and outside all of them were Bud-dhists but not a single case was hereditary. It was their generation which for the first time underwent a training in the GICI Training School. Their fathers work as guards (3 or 20%), peons (2 or 13.13%), farmers (5 or 33.33%), class III contractors (1 or 6.56%), carpenter (1 or 6.56%) and priest or lama (1 or 6.56%). Out of 15, 10 or 66.67% are the main bread-winners of the family.

Educational Background :

Since most of them come from or stay in remote villages where secondary schools are only recently being opened, none of them were found to have studied above class V and 2 or 13.13% were illiterates. It is plain enough that with

this educational background they cannot aspire to get higher level jobs.

Age and Sex :

Woodcarving is purely a male's monopoly because it involves a lot of physical strength but the women are also engaged in occupations like weaving, cane work, fancy articles etc. The informants fall in the age group of 18-27 except 2 who are much older.

The above description of the family background of the craftsmen clearly shows that they have little scope for occupational mobility. Besides the hindrances enumerated, above there are some more constraints related with the development of the arts and crafts of Sikkim.

a) *Social Status*: Though the craftsmen earn about Rs. 300 to 500 per month their status is regarded quite low by the local standards. Mr. Chopo Bhutia says thus about their marriage status: "It's quite difficult for us to get the bride for their parents look for serviceholders and not temporary workers like us". Another informant, Mr. Tshering Bhutia says, "Getting a girl is not a problem if you look handsome and have got some money on you". This is fairly true. But a negotiated marriage is not determined by one's looks, it depends upon one's social status.

b) *Labour Relationship* : The workers have not been able to ventilate their grievances mainly because they are not united. The officers of the Institute seem to have promised some of the workers a regularisation of jobs, which has kept them divided.

c) *Cultural Identity* : The training in the woodcarving specially is limited to the Lepchas and the Bhutias only. But like them the Tamangs and the Buddhalmargi Newers of the Nepalese society are also regarded as expert craftsmen. The Institute is regarded as the 'Protection Centre' of the Sikkimese culture but the

question that arises here is: are the Limbus not Sikkimese? Or does the Sikkimese mean only the Lepchas and the Bhutias?

Some Suggestions

For the development of the arts and crafts of Sikkim the following suggestions may be furnished.

Firstly, it is very important to regularise the jobs of the workers there. This would not only enhance their social status but would also better the quality of the articles because the workers would have no anxiety of future.

Secondly, the area should be more opened to the tourists to boost up the tourist economy of the State. This would not only help in developing the area but also the arts and crafts of this State.

Thirdly, the arts and crafts of Sikkim should not be confined to the Lepchas and the Bhutias only. It would not only inhibit the assimilation process in a plural society but might be a subject of resentment by the deprived communities in the long run when the unemployment problem becomes acute. The protection of the minority interest is certainly welcome but should it be at the cost of the state as a whole?

Fourthly, it appears that there is a vast resource—both human and physical—which has not been exploited properly in this State. If these local resources are properly channelised the prices of the articles would perhaps come down and would generate more employment for the people.

Finally, a serious attempt is required to restore the quality of the articles. One of the ways of doing so would be by encouraging the private entrepreneurs to enter into this monopolistic trade of the Government. This would create a competition and the quality would automatically rise up.

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...the above description of the family background of the craftsmen clearly shows that they have little scope for occupational mobility. Besides, the handicrafts enumerated above have not been mentioned in connection with the development of the arts and crafts of Sikkim. ... Through the handicrafts sector, the state is generating quite low by the local standards. Mr. Ghosh Banerjee says that their management sector is quite difficult for us to get the handicrafts and their payments look for a better and get temporary workers like in ... Banerjee informant, Mr. Ghosh Banerjee says "Giving a girl is not a problem if you find husband and have got some money on you. This is fairly true. But a proper match marriage is not determined by one's looks, it depends upon one's social status. ... The handicrafts sector has not been able to generate their own resources mainly because they are not united. The officers of the handicrafts seem to have promised some of the workers a regularization of jobs, which has kept them divided. ... Cultural Identity: The handicrafts in the woodwork sector is limited to the lacquer and the shellac only. But like from the Thangka and the Buddha-murti sector of the Nepalese society are also regarded as expert craftsmen. The lacquer is regarded as the 'protection' of the Sikkimese culture but the