declining crafts: looking through a different perspective

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Abstract

Many Indian crafts are facing extinction. Examples include stone sculpting in Odisha, cotton and silk weaving in Maharashtra, and Madhubani in Uttar Pradesh. This paper focuses on Madhubani, an intricate form of art and craft practiced by artisans in Bihar, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, used to mark special occasions, festivals and life events. The paper describes the external drivers threatening this craft, and the ways in which it has evolved to incorporate new tools and materials. It takes a practice-based approach, in which the author reflects on a three-month period of training with one of the last families of artisans in Madhubani, and the product and furniture designs she developed as a result. Convivial conversations with the family are recounted, and practitioners' concerns are described around the decline and lack of options for the survival of the craft. The paper finishes with recommendations for a collaborative creative action research approach to evolving the specific craft of Madhubani, in such a way that its true heritage is preserved.

Keywords: modernisation, madhubani, indian traditional craft, decline

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Introduction

In today's times, there are only a few traditional craft producers that survive. In India, millions of people possess traditional knowledge and skills and are still struggling to make a living by producing and creating handcrafted goods (Handmade in India: Preliminary Analysis of Crafts Producers and Crafts Production, 2015). It is believed that many Indian crafts are facing extinction. Government as well as private agencies are concerned about the same (Handmade in India: Preliminary Analysis of Crafts Producers and Crafts Production, 2015). Madhubani is the type of craft that mainly includes Hindu art and is declining. Commercialisation and modernisation resulted in the stylised version of the craft resulting into the lost of its original identity and importance (Mishra, 2015). It is believed that many Indian crafts are facing extinction. Examples include crafts like stone sculpting in Odisha (Craftandartisans, 2015), cotton and silk weaving in Maharashtra (Indianheritage, 2015), Kalamkari paintings of Andhra Pradesh (Stayorg, 2015) and Madhubani in Uttar Pradesh (Craftrevival, 2015). Madhubani is the type of art and craft that is done by the artisans in Uttar Pradesh, India. It is the type of painting that includes Hindu art and is done using different mediums such as twigs, brushes, fingers, nib-pens, matchsticks, natural dyes and pigments (Painting-drawing.knoji.com, 2015). These paintings are done for each occasion such as Weddings, Birth of a new-born, Indian festivities such as Durga puja, Kali Puja and Holi to name a few. These usually depict an assembly of images such as those of the lotus plant, fish, birds, bamboo groove, snakes and human figures characterised by eye-catching geometrical patterns. Each of these symbolises a meaning; the fish symbolises fertility and good luck, peacocks symbolise love and religion and the snakes are considered as the divine protectors (Kumar et al, 2014). They were originally done on walls that were coated with cow dung and mud. It is known that Madhubani painting earlier known as Mithila painting, which was a domestic activity and was not known by the people until the massive Bihar earthquake in 1934. It was only then that the British colonial officer in the Madhubani district and to be South Asian art director at the Victoria and Albert museum, discovered the paintings and he brought them into public attention in 1949 by writing an article on it in the Indian art journal, Marg (Kaur and Kaur, 2013). In the late 1960's, Bihar was endangered with a second natural disaster. It was then, when the government encouraged the women of Bihar to start painting on paper instead of walls as a source for income. Having evolved through the years, these paintings are now done on canvases, cloth and handmade paper (Das, 2015). These paintings were traditionally done in three forms, namely the floor paintings, wall paintings and paintings on movable objects. Rice paste was used as a medium for floor paintings and vibrant colours were used for wall paintings. There were three to four different colours used for the purpose of wall paintings. Paintings on movable objects included clay models of pots, elephants, mats and the faces of the brides (Mishra, 2015). Due to industrialisation and modernisation setting in, the traditional forms and cultural reasons of the craft started to decline. New art forms were being adapted in order to make some income from the craft. Stylised form of the craft started to take place hereby leading to a loss of the identity (Mithilapaintings, 2015).

There are various approaches to the preservation of crafts. Examples include historical attempts to engineer national identity, as seen in governmental initiatives in Japan (Freeman, 2016), Scotland (Peach, 2007), and Slovakia (Makovicky, 2009); communities of practice may be supported through learning and teaching programmes (Cumming, 1997); or semi-industrial craft practices may be brought into direct contact with the very drivers that threaten them, for example in the potteries in the United Kingdom (Bunnell, 2004). Many makers drop the term 'craft' in favour of 'design' or place a marketing emphasis on 'quality' in order to pacify markets and consumers, as they find that consumers can have a mindset of crafts as something that is handmade and not of a good quality. Researchers have further critiqued some attempts at preservation of communities of practice, for the subsequent 're-contextualisation' of cultures, which become separated from the evolving vernacular they were once an authentic part of (Makovicky, 2009). In India, this can be seen in the Western and Northern regions where there have been attempts to regenerate weaving and handloom craft in the Saurashtra and the Maharashtra regions through the injection of grants (Roy, 1999). This paper considers the dilemma facing craftspeople practicing Madhubani in light of these different approaches to preservation.

As a part of the training programme, the author had made notes about it in the form of interviews and casual conversations. It was necessary to make the artisans feels comfortable in order to get honest answers from them. The author tried understanding the history of the craft before getting into the deeper problems.

History

According to mythology, it is said that the art originated during the time of Ramayana, when king Janak ordered the kingdom to paint and decorate the town for his daughter Sita's wedding to lord Ram. The ancient tradition of wall

paintings in Bihar played a major role in the emergence of this new art form. It is believed that women craved religiousness and an intense desire to connect and be one with god and they began painting images of gods and goddesses in such a divine way that it captured many hearts and the new art form named Madhubani, emerged. The three different castes of the Madhubani region had their own different styles of doing the paintings. (Author's notes)

The Brahmins were the highest among these three castes. The Brahmin style of painting consisted the use of vibrant colours and the paintings were inspired from the Hindu mythological stories of gods and goddesses namely Ram, Krishna, Durga and Shiva. As the Brahmins could easily access to the sacred Hindu literature, it was easy for them to portray it in their paintings. This caste mainly paints with the themes of gods and goddesses and magical symbols connected with the deities. (Author's notes)

The Kayasthas were a little below the Brahmins. The Kayastha style of painting consisted of the elaborate wall paintings of the nuptial chamber or the "kohbar ghar" which symbolise sexual pleasure and procreation. This caste used only black and red colours in their paintings. The Kayasthas and the Brahmins shared a similarity in their paintings as far as the subjects were concerned. The styles of these paintings go back to the Aryan dynasty, which consisted of line- drawings of sacred symbols such as the lotus plant, bamboo grove, fish, tortoises, parrots and birds that symbolised fertility. (Author's notes)

The Dusadhs were the lowest caste and were refrained from painting the themes that represented the divinities. They were known for their tattoo paintings, which included themes of flora, fauna and the legend of the Dusadh caste, Raja Salhesh. These are line – drawing paintings that are divided into several horizontal lines and margins. Considering the use of vibrant and rich use of colour in the paintings, the artists have now started using themes based on the Hindu mythology in their paintings. (Author's notes)

Figure 1

Case study

The authors practice based approach constitutes of a three-month training period with one of the last families of artisans in the Madhubani art at Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India where in the author had called the artisans over for a collaboration project. The data was then collected through various illustrations, photographs, recordings, and conversations with the artisans. Figures 1 and 2 show the original work of the artists the author worked with.

It was with these artisans that the author collaborated with and created new pieces of tables and chairs. During the training period,
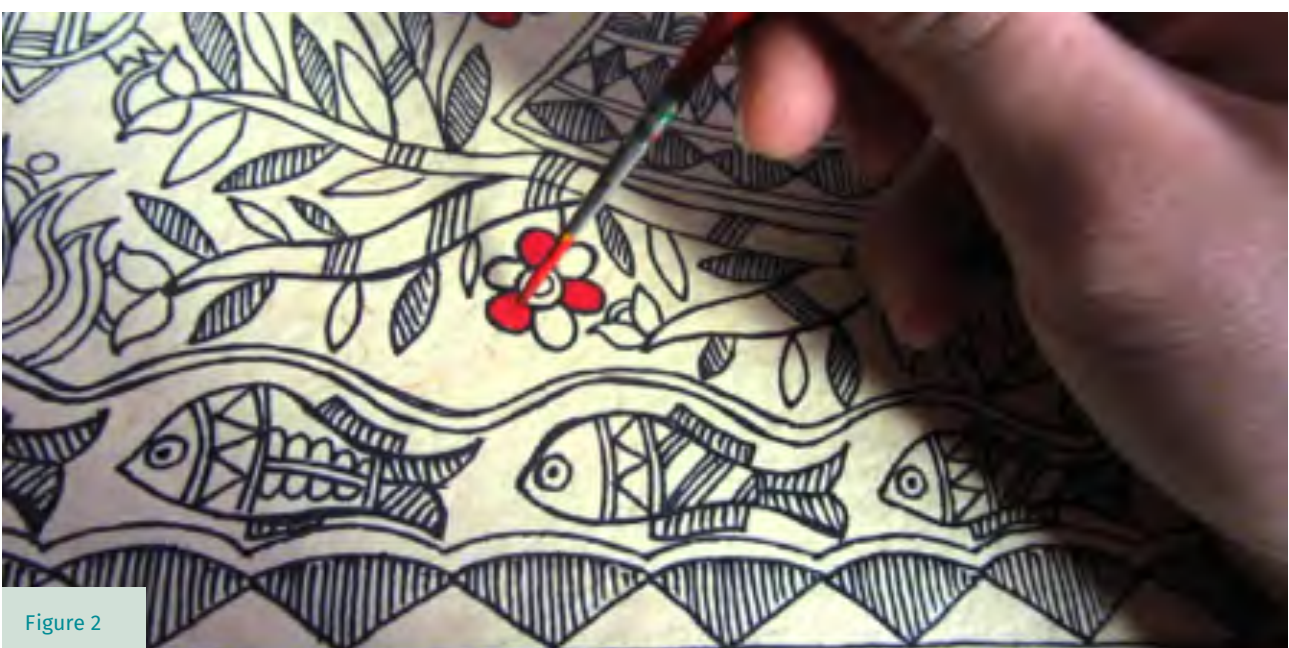

Figure 2

the author learnt and acquired skills and knowledge of the traditional Madhubani craft. Convivial conversations with the artisans made the author aware of the exploitation of the artisans by the government, suicide rates of the artisans who had been failing to earn because of the decline of the traditional craft and how the new modernisation era has lead to a major decline in the traditional and the original form of art.

Contradictions in research

The authors' convivial conversations with the families' state that the current scenario of the craft and the scenario mentioned in the research contradict with each other (Painting-drawing.knoji.com, 2015) (Kumar et al, 2014) (Kaur and Kaur, 2013) (Das, 2015) (Mishra, 2015) (Mithilapaintings, 2015). The conversations state that the art is neither upcoming nor growing but is declining. The artisans state that with the evolution of technology and digital art setting in, not many are ready to carry on the practice. People are not ready to buy the original paintings, as they are more inclined towards modern art. With the increase in basic standard of living and a decrease in the craft opportunities, artisans have migrated and chosen to opt for some kind of work resulting into declination of heritage. According to a recent study, four artisans killed themselves while the other few died because of starvation. There have been more such cases in the recent years where the artisans have committed suicide because of devastating financial situation and also because of a feeling of hopelessness in a world where their art skills and knowledge were once appreciated and respected, which now had become unwanted (Libel and Roy, 2015). While Das' research states that the craft is upcoming and the artisans are being recognised all over the world (Das, 2015) the artisans say that it is recognised but for the modern form of the art and not for its traditional form. Das' also states that there are various governmental centres that are playing a major role as far as the development of the cultural scenario of Bihar is concerned (Das, 2015). The artisans claim the opposite. They say that the centres have been developed but no steps have been taken for the betterment of the cultural scenario. Das says that the office of development commissioner, ministry of textiles is working under the government of Bihar in order to give opportunities to express their cultural activities in different places (Das, 2015). While the artisans that the author-interviewed claim that there have been no such opportunities given to them and the government approaches them only when there is a talk show or an interview-taking place. There are 38 training centres that are there in Bihar which are supposedly made for the development of its craft and keeping the cultural heritage alive but none of them work towards it. These centres have been claiming of providing the necessary skills to the artisans and providing them the necessary financial benefits and guidance through workshops and seminars but yet again, these artisans deny it saying that the government centres exploit the artisans by giving them negligible amount from the so called government schemes and awards.

Decline and modernisation

Digitalisation and modernisation of the craft lead to a decrease in demand of the handicraft sector. The new stylised forms of the same art, lead to a decrease in its traditional value hereby the craft losing its identity. Digitalisation and modernisation are the root cause of traditional crafts disappearing. The originality of the craft is dying and due to modernisation, there are artisans who have given up on making traditional and original crafts hereby focusing on making stylised modern paintings. Hence, old craft heritage is being lost. Commercialisation has ruined the originality of the art. New art forms are being formed without knowing the importance of the traditional art and the importance of women or each symbol in the art. New colour schemes are being formed and paintings are made without any rhythm in the background, forms, colours, songs and rituals. The buyer decides the themes of the modern form of the art and the paintings are made according to the themes and the colour combinations given by the buyer (Mishra, 2015).

Another research supported this by stating that the artists have been called to the various countries abroad for conducting workshops and this is how the art has reached overseas, but along with reaching overseas it has also lost its traditions. The traditions of the art aren't preserved and new styles and themes have been formed (Mithilapaintings, 2015).

Figures 3 and 4 clearly depict the evolution of the art from its traditional form to its stylised form. The original paintings contain all the aspects of the
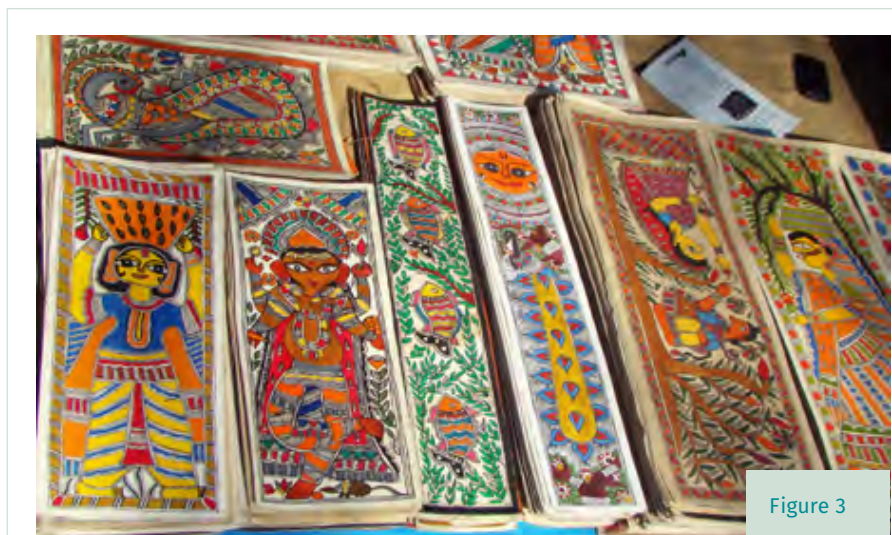

Figure 3

Figure 4

traditional heritage with each form showing its own importance (figure 3).

The stylised version of the art does not do any justice to its original form. The stylised version proves that the cultural heritage of the craft is being lost (figure 4).

Before the Industrial Revolution took place, everything was more or less handmade. With the rise in repeatable, machine production artefacts became cheaper with a consistent quality but it also lost its uniqueness and became impersonal. Along with this, came a change in society's perception of a craftsperson. Since machines could replicate the handwork, the skills of a man and his expertise to make various objects lost value. However, the ability of the mind to visualise and plan its implementation had risen. This made it seem like the craft was becoming less valuable and irrelevant in the modern society; yet craft is experiencing a renaissance.

In recent times craft techniques, approaches and skills have been progressively been used in contemporary art, fashion and design. Craft practices are also coming up in other fields. An upcoming community of design and technology researchers is finding out a solution on blending crafts and electrical engineering and computer science together (Jacobs, 2013).

It is necessary to give time and space to the crafts in the twenty first century and make the making valuable (Frayling, 2011). Craft, as a discipline with increasing significance could be contributing to new product development. According to designer Jean Beebe, *"crafts education and practice is centred on a dialogue between creativity, materials and skills, the maker developing ideas by combining conceptual vision with manipulation of the object"* (Frayling, 2011). Many craft makers inherit the creative stimulus for a lifetimes work with the vision and skill being developed side by side. The limitations of her skills hampered the advancing ideas and their parameters. However, she worked with craft makers who were highly skilled and who could produce the size and the thickness required for the blown glass, which lead to a collaboration of a designers crafts knowledge and the craft makers skills, which made the product development unique. Beebe's ideas and crafts design knowledge along with the craft makers' skills made the weakness of both the designer (lack of skills) and the craft makers' (lack of design knowledge) became stronger by collaboration and new creative products were developed. It also helped in developing appreciation between the quality of the product and the product creating system along with developing a relationship between the craft skills and the employees and the effects of form and processes on pricing. Apart from that the collaboration has also played a major role in expansion of ideas and in developing the ability to motivate the craft makers to work (Sciencedirect, 2015). In order to achieve a unique product development and preserve the uniqueness of each traditional craft, collaboration of traditional art and design is necessary. It is important to preserve the traditional crafts for the benefit of design and product development. Therefore, traditional crafts need to be preserved.

Future

Traditional craft of Madhubani is declining. It can be concluded from the primary and secondary investigations that the craft is coming towards an end by losing its identity. Not many artisans are ready to continue the practice due to the increasing standard of living and there are some who are giving up their lives due to the feeling of sheer hopelessness and lack of respect. The craft is losing its traditional value; the government is claims to offer help but is not helping in the development of the cultural scenario of the craft. Modernisation and digitalisation are playing a major role in the death of this and many other traditional crafts. Therefore, it is necessary to preserve this craft and save the cultural heritage. Having learnt this craft from the artisans, the author intends on focusing on using this craft on different mediums such as wood, glass, metal, fabric, etc. in such a way that the traditional heritage of the craft is not lost. The author tends to make an aesthetically as well as practically designed range of furniture and lifestyle products that help the artisans in preserving their cultural and traditional identity. Having worked with both traditional as well as digital art, the author concluded that digital art could not do what these handicrafts could do. However, by using the term "design" instead of "craft" and by focusing more on the quality the author intends on using this and some similar declining crafts, in different contemporary projects. The author wants to create a blend

of crafts and innovative furniture designs focusing on making these artisans aware of the different techniques and, how exploration and experimentation would lead to a different progress while preserving their heritage. There are too many artisans who commit suicide because of the loss of their identity and a feeling of hopelessness. In order to protect their identity, keeping their source of income constant and also preserve the traditional aspect of the craft; the author, while working with the artisans suggested the method of introducing their work as a design and not refer to it as a craft. The focus however, would still be on the traditional aspect of the art but in such a way that the art becomes a part of the modernistic furniture design and making a new design line out of it that preserves the craft's identity and heritage.

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