Crafts at school

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THE familiar look of India's village schools presents a conundrum. How can so sad-looking a space be assigned to learning, in a society which has sustained a breathtaking variety of aesthetic wealth in the objects of everyday use? When I visit the lower and upper KG classrooms of elite urban schools and find them stuffed with tacky plastic equipment, I don't know how to respond or to figure out for myself why our educational entrepreneurs, who claim to be more imaginative than government officers, are so ignorant of the resources they can draw upon from the world of India's heritage crafts to run a decent early childhood programme. When I visit the Cottage Industries Emporium, the size of its toy section always shocks me. I then wonder how many more Kamaladevi Chattopadhyayas, Pupul Jayakars, and Laila Tyabjis, and Urmuls,[1] SEWAs[2] and Sandhis[3] we will require before our icy education system melts towards the crafts.

As I see the front covers of the latest textbooks which have arrived from Rajasthan – their content being entirely another matter for despair – I am puzzled how a state with a stunning sense of colour and design can produce such barren title pages, why the Ajmer-based board office couldn't work with Tilonia to design at least the cover nicely for millions of Rajasthan's children? I should know better. There are no bridges between crafts and schools, between artisans and teachers, and between India's children and their national heritage.

The idea that handicrafts should be introduced in the school curriculum is neither new nor contentious as such, yet it looks as hard to implement now as it proved between 1937 and 1967. After it received Mahatma Gandhi's spirited advocacy, the idea moved forward despite substantial opposition which partly owed to Gandhi's politics and personality, but mainly to the historical conditions in which the independence struggle found itself during the War years. Cynicism and confusion towards new ideas and the license to misinterpret them were as common then as they are now. Even a progressive writer and thinker like Mulk Raj Anand criticised Gandhi's proposal, ostensibly on the ground that it would legitimize and encourage child labour. The Congress-League divide became a major factor in creating a hostile ethos for a holistic craft-based Basic Education in the learner's mother tongue.[4]

Despite these problems, the idea did get implemented and received considerable favour after independence in several parts of India. It produced a generation which received something different from the staple of colonial schooling. If there is one word we might use to describe that something, it would be resourcefulness. The desire to make things with one's own hands and the confidence that one can make all kinds of things – indeed *anything* as one would rightly believe during childhood, if the basic urge to recreate the world is not muzzled – was what Gandhi's *nai taalim* was able to impart to quite a few among those who went to Basic Schools.

Despite considerable success, and due to a variety of now well-documented reasons, Basic Education was put to sleep in the wake of the Kothari report of 1964-66 though I am quite sure there was no explicit intention to do this. India had by then entered a new phase of its development, and in the ethos of the late 1960s, craft-centred education for children started to look like an unnecessary, idyllic whim. Several other Gandhian ideas met with a similar fate.

One major reason why the introduction of handicrafts at school looks difficult to implement now is because of the popular perception that it has failed once. The notion that ideas 'succeed' or 'fail' is entrenched in the world of decision-makers at all levels. Who wants to give a failed idea a second run when so many shining new ideas are being relentlessly supplied by the IT industry, engineers-turned-educators and management gurus, not to forget the multilateral agencies which invent terms and programmes quite regularly for Third World consumption? India's heritage crafts don't fit in the commonly peddled vision of 'developed'. How can they? As plastic spreads to cover our lives like a vast blanket, we cannot even remember what diversity of sensory experiences mean, let alone the diversity of culture and lifestyles. The dream of becoming a developed nation is fast becoming like manufacturing twenty-eight flavours of ice cream with one taste.

On the other hand, handicrafts are perhaps the most representative symbol of India's cultural plurality. They signify the integration of work and values, in a context which recognises the presence of the artist in every human being. These days we identify and honour a few exponents of crafts as 'master craftsmen'. Such a category suits and satisfies our competitive temper. Even as we discriminate between export-quality artisans and the rest for favours like free railway passes etc.,[5] we ought to remember that in tradition the artisan was an ordinary member of the village community. Indeed, the practice of a craft was an aspect of ordinary life, and a craft product was meant to be used in the course of everyday living.

Craft products covered all spheres of life and filled them all with the grace and a gentle light of unassuming beauty. A broom to sweep the floor, a mat or cot to sleep on, a pillow case to lay one's head down on, a pot to store water, a doll or clay horse to play with, or a shawl to protect oneself from the cold wind – all were designed to be of use even as they infused the daily journey of life with continuous aesthetic strength, acting like a cultural drip irrigation device.

It is at this level of life's routine depth that the crafts serve as a sign of India's vast and stunning diversity. It is moderately ironical that I arrived at this understanding while walking through a museum in Pakistan. We have nothing to match it, so a few lines about it are necessary. I'm referring to Lok Virsa, located on the outskirts of Islamabad. This luminous creation of Pakistan's Department of Folklore presents the inner face of that country, a face which has sustained its radiance and diversity despite all the misfortunes that the collective national life has experienced.

Lok Virsa celebrates, in a splendour of modern museological effort and devices, the vast range of crafts practiced in Pakistan. The displays communicate, in depth, the relations between a craft, the physical geography of the region where it has flourished, its place in community life and role in shaping the local culture, its belief system and gender relations.[6] Lok Virsa explicitly celebrates women's contribution to a civilization rooted in crafts. As a South Asian visitor from India, I found Lok Virsa a moving reminder of what the crafts can do to bring us confidence, prosperity and peace in the entire region.

It will be a good idea to try linking education with the crafts once again, but with the requisite hindsight to avoid earlier mistakes, because both sectors are facing a similar crisis. Education represents a space where a society can regenerate itself if it uses the space judiciously – the heart of education is reflection in the course of relating. It is a well-established fact that India's education system has stayed moribund partly because of the colonial legacies of administration and financial management, but mainly because of older cultural legacies which divide literacy and intellectual learning from manual work and dexterity. Our national failure to universalise elementary education and to reform the system so that it stops acting like a crude instrument of social exclusion of the so-called weaker sections (including over 10 million artisans), has to do as much with the cultural character of the curriculum as with our rigid administrative practices.

Delays in implementing reforms have cost us heavily. Far from nurturing self-confidence and initiative in the young, our system makes them feel alienated from the larger society and scared of exercising personal judgement in any sphere of life. It neither trains the senses, nor does it nurture sensibility. For millions, the system continues to act, as it did in the late-nineteenth century, as a means of getting a piece of paper which offers the promise of ever-scarce office jobs. The need to link work and education has been one of the loudest refrains in post-independence history of policy discussions, but little progress has been made in reducing the gap between mental and manual work which forms one of the oldest negative values in our culture. Gandhi's proposal for a new kind of Basic Education was essentially aimed at bridging that gap, but things did not go the way he had charted.

There is no reason why we cannot revisit Gandhi's idea of introducing crafts into the school curriculum, not as an extra-curricular activity, but rather as an experience which will give greater meaning and depth to the rest of the curriculum. If we think about this matter afresh and work on it with imagination and hindsight, we might reform the system of education in a manner which only the crafts can help us reform, and in the process, we might also provide to our heritage of crafts a major institutional space where new designs, techniques, relationships and visions can flourish. Like much else in a caste-ridden social order, both the knowledge and skill aspects of crafts have suffered from the effects of isolation and stagnation. Linking formal education with crafts could help foster creativity in both.

Before I proceed to discuss this proposed linkage further, I would like to briefly examine the crisis which the crafts are facing in the economic world, with the help of two books,

The Making of a Cybertariat by Ursula Huws[7] and *The Real World of Technology* by Ursula Franklin.[8]

Ursula Huws is a labour economist whose commitment to feminism and Marxism disqualifies her from being called a Luddite. Her argument in the only book she has published in a long career of fighting for workers' rights in England is that something special is happening in the history of technology and social relations, and that we are passing through a watershed which demands a new level of human ingenuity to fight ideological fatigue. An equilibrium reached in employer-worker relations after WWII is caving in, she argues. Many such break-points have occurred in the history of technology, each one representing a new level of capital being invested to incorporate human skills in technology itself and make the owners of skills redundant – but the current one is more pervasive. Huws shows us that the direction science and technology take depends on where profits and hence investments take us; in other words, the growth of technology and the science that supports it has to do with values and intentions.

Huws gives numerous examples, one being that of the emerging 'cybertariat' which has incorporated all the skills that office workers – mostly women in the western world – had used to develop a collective self-identity over the post-war decades. It matters no more how well you can design a letter and format it, or how dexterously you can correct the errors made in the first draft. The craft element in the secretary's job has been withdrawn. The desktop has centuries of craftsmanship incorporated in it; the user now merely clicks at the required sign, one of the several offered in menu, 'format', 'view', or simply 'help'. Huws brings out the change this will cause in economic and cultural relations, especially in the sphere of secular, work-based identity. In the process of giving us several such examples, she gives us a clue to how to define crafts – as something which requires care, personal attention, and develops an identity by conveying: 'this is what I do well; this is who I am.'

The crisis faced by crafts is really a reflection of a larger disequilibrium which identity conflicts represent sharply enough for social scientists, even economists, to take notice of. Take, for example, tailoring. What makes it a craft is the relationship with a person which shapes the concern and care shown in cutting, stitching and the final, finer work. When the individual a tailor is stitching for, turns into a body size, the craft might as well vanish into software which leaves the garment factory worker with no judgement to exercise, only the relevant buttons to press at desired moments.

Those of us who are making a case for heritage crafts in the school curriculum are obviously greatly disturbed by the economic, technological and economic changes we notice around us. Such changes have occurred earlier in the history of crafts as well, but this time the crisis is likely to spread faster. There are countries which have managed to protect their crafts by reconciling to the new reality and working within it. South Africa is one such country where organization and marketing of craft products are now tightly linked to commerce and tourism. In India too, this effort is under way, though the scale of our operation is quite limited and our progress slow. With good management minds

applied in due course, I am sure we will succeed in creating a large enough market for our crafts, and perhaps a considerable number of craftsmen and women will find it possible to make a living – at least a better living than they are able to afford at present.

Finding a larger clientele for craft products is indeed a major challenge by itself, but the future of crafts will be shaped by many more decisions and initiatives. Perhaps the most important ones will be about the social status of artisans in India's democracy. Education is undoubtedly a major factor which will shape the future of artisans and the crafts they practice. Not just education of their children, but also the links that education – as a system – might allow to be formed between the knowledge and skill embedded in India's craft heritage, will determine how capable our crafts become in surviving the onslaught of the neo-liberal doctrine, and after ensuring survival, in shaping the future of our civilization. The present moment offers little room for complacency.

In her book, The Real World of Technology, Ursula Franklin makes a distinction between holistic and prescriptive technologies. The basis of this distinction is whether the technology permits individuals to control it. Whereas prescriptive technologies are efficient and allow large numbers of people to act as a group, they transfer control over all aspects of the work to someone above. Moreover, each person knows only how to do the bit for which he or she is responsible. In holistic technology, people control the process of their own work from beginning to end. Decisions are taken while a product is being worked on by the artisan, not by someone with higher authority.

Franklin, who is among Canada's foremost experimental physicists, gives the example of casting of large vessels in ancient China to illustrate the earliest example of prescriptive technology. Work was organized in a series of separately implemented tasks in which a large number of people were involved, all complying with the precise specifications supervised by a boss or manager. She illustrates holistic technology with the help of handicrafts which require the individual creator of an object to conceptualize it, work on it, and complete it. The two kinds of technologies, Franklin says, 'involve distinctly different specializations and divisions of labour, and consequently they have very different social and political implications' (p. 10).

Prescriptive technology promotes a culture of compliance; this happened in ancient China, Franklin argues, by shaping social and political thought and giving rise to the earliest known example of a bureaucracy. Holistic technology, used in a vast variety of crafts, shaped social and political institutions in Europe. During the industrial revolution, prescriptive technologies 'spread like an oil slick,' Franklin says, but she argues that the element of choice continues to be relevant. Although the survival of holistic technologies has become more precarious, there are urgent reasons (such as the scarcity of environmental resources and political crises of different kinds which both the highly industrialized and the less industrialized countries are facing) to exercise discretion and choice to identify the spheres in which the two kinds of technologies need to be deployed.

For countries which have a long tradition of handicrafts, the process of modernising industries has meant considerable anguish and a sense of threat for social groups which specialize in a certain handicraft and depend on it for their survival. This kind of anguish has been expressed in India quite continuously by patrons of handicrafts, many of whom have struggled hard for their entire careers to secure a place for the crafts in the state's plans for economic development. While this battle must continue, a space for the survival and advancement of crafts needs to be claimed within the system of school education. This is what the National Curriculum Framework, 2005 (NCF), seeks to do.

The Focus Group report for heritage crafts prepared under the NCF exercise points out that crafts have, over the centuries, served as a resource for both metaphors and ideas in Indian philosophy, metaphysics, art and social living. The report says that 'craft – both in theory and in practice – can be a powerful tool of emotional, economic and intellectual empowerment for children at all levels, locations and sectors of school and society.'[9] This claim should suffice to inspire any school principal or state education officer to give crafts a chance.

The introduction of crafts in the school curriculum has the potential to trigger several long-desired reforms in the system of education. To realise the full potential of a crafts curriculum, a number of preparatory steps would have to be taken. One has to do with how we organise the availability of equipment and material necessary for the teaching of crafts in schools which opt for it. If we treat this task as a question of purchase and supply, we might end up repeating the mistakes made in the course of Operation Blackboard in the late l980s. There are alternatives.

For private (or 'public' as they are known in India) schools, there is perhaps no problem in making their own decisions about where they will acquire the equipment they want such as looms, cloth, colours and threads, wood, clay or kilns. In private schools, the real challenge lies in changing the management's – and often the principal's – mind about tinsel, gloss and air-conditioning pointing to the way forward. The lifestyle and demands of the urban elite parent is what private schools will have to contend with when they attempt to find a space for the crafts in their stuffed timetables. The fear that their boys will miss the IIT entrance if they spend time learning how to make a shoe after reading Galsworthy's 'Quality'[10] in their English textbook, will deter a lot of principals and heads of management committees.

A far bigger systemic challenge faces the government school system, including its more privileged sub-systems represented by Kendriya and Navodaya Vidyalayas. Government schools are not treated like individual institutions. Everything happens because of a directive from above, and it applies to all schools. Many great ideas of reform have failed to make a dent because of the failure to treat each government school as an autonomous unit whose principal and teachers should have the professional freedom to make decisions on certain matters within a framework of choices.

If crafts are introduced as a decision taken by an enlightened state director, that will guarantee its demise even as it attempts to begin. Unsuitable choices will be made, equipment and material will be supplied through procedures prone to corruption, and in the end, this material will remain locked in boxes. Instead, if only an outline is proposed and individual schools are allowed to choose the craft they want to introduce, and the sources where they will acquire the relevant equipment and material, the principal can be legitimately expected to feel responsible for the outcome of the project. This is what the NCF has suggested as a general reform with wide-ranging implications.[11] Crafts are a good starting point to moot the idea of institutional autonomy.

Schools which introduce crafts in their curriculum should involve locally available crafts persons to work with children and teachers. There is hardly a region in India which does not have its own craft traditions and people who still practice these despite the stress they are under. As the National Focus Group on Heritage Crafts passionately pleads, these locally available crafts persons must be paid a decent honorarium when they are invited to work with school teachers and children. Linking craft teaching with the traditional school subjects, instead of treating them as an extra-curricular add-on, is necessary to firmly entrench work-related values and ethics in the school's life.[12]

Schools which decide to initiate craft teaching should draw connections between different aspects of the chosen craft and the other subjects. For instance, Mathematics can be linked with material and design aspects, whereas science can be taught while studying the processes involved in crafts like pottery. The vocabulary specific to a craft can be utilised and ramified in language and literature classes with the help of relevant literary material (such as Phanishwarnath Renu's short story, 'Thes'[13] or Galsworthy's story 'Quality' which has been referred to earlier). The social geography of a craft (i.e. who are its practitioners, where are their products sent and sold for use, etc.) can be linked to the social science curriculum.

Teaching crafts at school must also be seen as an aspect of art education. The existing art curriculum tends to focus on the classical traditions and ignores the folk traditions in which the crafts are usually embedded. There is an urgent need to redefine the art curriculum in all major areas, i.e. music, dance, theatre, and the visual arts, to incorporate folk traditions and styles. In the context of such a redefinition, craft programmes can be accommodated within a broader art education framework. This is not a plea for ignoring the other possibilities that a crafts programme can open up, such as linkages with vocational training which leads towards manufacturing skills and attitudes. These also lie within the domain of craft education but they need not form the main terrain or basis of craft-advocacy, partly because we have experienced this line in the Gandhian phase without much success, and also because we have no immediate reason to expect a sudden alleviation of the crisis which the crafts are facing in the context of economic survival.

Schools which opt for a crafts- in-curriculum project can shed their worries about value education. The term 'value education' is a reminder of the extent to which our expectations from education per se have declined. One comes across different kinds of

programmes aimed at putting values into education, as if what has been going on in schools can now be infused with a handful of values. Crafts will play this role in a manner which many may not easily recognise because the value component of craft-learning is subtle.

When children learn a craft, they participate in a process which gives the individual learner ample room to experiment within a warm but demanding tradition of rigour. Standards of correctness rise from one's own work. The ability to re-do or correct oneself is nurtured spontaneously, provided that the teacher is not oppressive and that the principal is not planning to display children's 'best' products at the annual day function to be admired by a VIP chief guest. Higher-order ethical values arise in the context of relations with others, including relations with nature. The late David Horsburgh explained how the material one works on teaches us how to relate to it: if we ill-treat a piece of wood we are trying to carve, it breaks.

Marjorie Sykes, in her book on life with Gandhi,[13] recounts her conversations with children and teachers who had learnt spinning as part of the Basic Education programme. The teachers told her that they pick cotton bolls only when they are fully ripe, for then 'a gentle touch is all that is needed, they come away easily. If they don't, they are not yet ready for picking. We should wait another few days. We should not be impatient or greedy.' Sykes comment is: 'That was education too, education in how to handle other living things, plants and animals, with respect for the natural cycle of their own lives – education in one aspect of non-violence' (p. 54).

Many other aspects of craft learning will emerge as being relevant to education in ethics when schools and teacher training institutions start working with artisans. A different sense of time and rigour, personal care for the product and a sense of detail are normal features of any craft experience. Whether you embroider a handkerchief or carve a piece of wood, you enter a rhythm of self-discovery, joy and comfort. If you practice a craft in an ethos which guarantees individual dignity and fairness, you gain self-confidence of a kind that nothing else give.

Footnotes:

1. Urmul Trust works with the underprivileged poor in Rajasthan to fight poverty in many ways, one of which is to help craftsmen find better markets for their goods.

2. Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) strives to make women workers self-reliant and avail of employment security, as part of which larger movement the organisation also works with crafts-persons.

3. Sandhi is a not-for-profit organisation which works to find new and innovative ways to market craft products fairly, while also working with crafts-persons to help them build their capacity and infrastructure to meet the demands of new markets.

4. For details, see *Prejudice and Pride* by Krishna Kumar, Penguin, New Delhi, 2001; also see 'National Education as a Community Issue: The Muslim Response to the Wardha Scheme' by Joachim Oesterheld in *Education and Social Change in South Asia*, eds. Krishna Kumar and Joachim Oesterheld, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 156-195.

5. For a discussion of this and other issues relevant to the crafts sector, see the introductory essay by Laila Tyabji in *Seminar* 523, March 2003, pp. 12-16.

6. Ibid.

7. Monthly Review Press, New York, 2005.

8. Anansi, Toronto, 1990; Rev., 1999.

9. National Focus Group, Position Paper on Heritage Crafts, NCERT, New Delhi, 2006.

10. This short story narrates how the industrial revolution effected the life and cultural values of village society in England. The story revolves around a shoemaker whose judgement and skill are unmatched by mass-produced footwear.

11. The National Focus Group on Heritage Crafts (op cit). lists a number of sources from which advice can be sought regarding crafts and where to obtain the required material and information.

12. For details, see National Focus Group position paper on Work and Education, NCERT, New Delhi, 2007.

13. Jehangir P. Patel and Marjorie Sykes, *Gandhi: His Gift of the Fight*, Friends Rural Centre, Rasulia, 1987.