

## Thematic issues on Status and Position of Artisans in India

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**Abstract:** Caste as a Social System in India, is a form of Social Stratification. Varna System was a functional division of labour based on *guna* or aptitude. In course of time, each stratum developed its own subculture, the Shudras were reduced to permanent backwardness as a service class. Each caste has its own customs, traditions and rituals to regulate the behavior of Caste members. Caste gets survival through this behavior. Caste economy promoted occupational interdependence (*jajmani* system). These occupational caste groups can be categorized as (i) Artisan castes (ii) Service castes. For a comprehensive understanding of the current status of the Artisan sector in southern India, it is important to understand the Artisan value chain. It depends on Human Resources, Legal Entities, Credits, Facilities, Technology, Transport to markets, Quality checks, Marketing and promotion goods. Globalization is unique processes which offer new opportunities to humankind but also poses many challenges. The biggest problem while implementing the developmental schemes is the lack of proper knowledge on handicraft units and number of artisans. Hence this paper suggests three major themes across the study.

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### I. Introduction

Studies on Artisans in India range through a variety of perspectives and disciplines, such as Development-oriented studies, Surveys, Sociological studies, Anthropological and Ethnographic account. But in all these studies, a contemporary attempt to review the scholarly literature on the status and position of Artisan in general and OBC artisans in particular is deeply missing.

The present paper is organized as follows, first part consisting of review of basic conceptual issues pertaining to Caste System in India. In second part, the OBC Artisans and their role in the small scale – informal inherent production sector has been considered along with previous studies on Artisans. In 3<sup>rd</sup> part, marginalization of Artisans in the context of Globalization and Neo-Liberal Orthodoxies has been considered. The 4<sup>th</sup> part consisting of thematic issues as core focus of the problem considered.

### II. Caste System in India

Caste as a Social System in India, is a form of Social Stratification. Caste is a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group having traditional association with a occupation and particular position in local hierarchy of castes. There are two views which are prominent in understanding Caste i.e., (i) Caste is a Pre-Aryan institution, part of the prehistoric clan life in India and that Aryans found it as a convenient basis for race relations based on inferiority and superiority in their dealings with natives. (ii) As per western scholars, the caste system with the original Varna system which classified Individuals into Four groups. Varna System was a functional division of labour based on *guna* or *aptitude*. The original Varna model did not imply any gradation on the basis of ritual purity although four *varnas* were unequal in status hierarchy. Since the groups were not based on hereditary status, individuals were supposed to perform functions for which they had necessary talent.

In course of time, each stratum developed its own subculture, the *Shudras* were reduced to permanent backwardness as a service class. Those who resisted oppression and preferred to live independent lives retired to forests and today counted among the tribes of India. The privileged castes rewrote the scriptures introduced the *Theory of Pollution* and made new philosophical interpretations of Sacred texts to justify their superiority based on the principles of *Karma* (action) and *Dharma* (religion) and to perpetuate the serfdom of masses of untouchables and out castes. Thus established caste system based on birth is perversion of *Varna* [1].

Risley says that people of some castes migrating to other regions found it necessary to effect marital alliance among the limited number in the new habitant. In the course of time these emigrants became a sub-caste usually distinguished by a territorial name leading to various sub-castes [2]. Each caste has its own customs, traditions and rituals to regulate the behavior of Caste members. Caste gets survival through this behavior.

As per *Structural – Functional* perspective of Caste system, caste was functional with structural division of labour in anticipation of promoting efficient economy in the execution of traditional occupations

perpetuating through generations [3]. Caste economy promoted occupational interdependence (*jajmani system*) [4].

In pre-industrial Indian society, where occupations were caste based families acted as economic unit. Most economic activity took place within the house hold, and production and distribution were organized by customs and traditions.

### **III. Artisans**

In the evolution of caste system, there are about 64 types of caste-based occupational groups existing and around ninety percent of them performing particular caste functions within a *jajmani system*, mostly belong to intermediary castes popularly now known as Backward Castes or Other Backward Castes (OBCs). These occupational caste groups can be categorized as (i) Artisan castes (ii) Service castes. India has one of the most diverse and ancient traditions of Artisan products. The workmanship of the Indian craftsman is so exquisite that throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries India was known to other countries on the trade route more by her crafts than by her art, religion and philosophy [5].

In the Artisan castes, the family has been a multi-generational producer with capital and land provided by older generations and labour provided by younger generations. Women as a daughter/mother/wife were actively participating in caste based occupations. As the production was home-based women after completing their daily house-hold work used to make huge contribution in the production process [6].

Broadly artisans are divided into the following categories with a rigid hierarchical division of labour between more and less skilled artisans in a particular craft.

- a) Skilled master craftsman
- b) Wage-worker
- c) Fully self-employed artisan
- d) Part-time artisan

The Artisan sector can be discussed here from both macro and micro level – taking its contribution to the Indian economy through export and micro level – in terms of its employment potential.

A meaningful analysis of the Artisan sector requires focusing on particular geographies and crafts. For a comprehensive understanding of the current status of the Artisan sector in southern India, it is important to understand the Artisan value chain. It depends on

Human Resources, Legal Entities, Credits, Facilities, Technology, Transport to markets, Quality checks, Marketing and promotion goods.

### **IV. Globalization and its Impacts on Artisans**

Globalization refers to the integration of economic, political and cultural systems across the globe. It comprises five ways of flow namely *Ethnoscapas*, *Technoscapas*, *Financescapas*, *Mediascapas* and *Ideoscapas* [7,8]. Thus, globalization is a unique process which not only offers new opportunities to humankind but also poses many challenges.

A large section of Artisan population, in India in-general and Southern Indian in particular, is illiterate and is devoid of formal education. Poverty again makes them become more vulnerable. As a result, most of the artisans choosing to shift to other professions rather than stick into their hereditary occupation. A study by *Soma Basu* suggests that the weavers of Pattamadai mats of Tamil Nadu in general and women artists in particular are increasingly shifting to the profession like *beedi rolling*, which is faster and easier and which earns higher returns [9].

A report of the census conducted by National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in 1995-96 suggests that, the handloom sector boasts of 3 to 4 million weavers, whereas in 1987-88, it was 4 to 3 million [10].

The UN report suggest that over the past three-four decades in India the number of artisans has declined by at least 30% with many joining the ranks of casual laborers and the informal economy [11].

As per *T.J. Scrase*, mass produce and market ‘sari’ cloth, based on Indian designs, making a ‘*virtual artisan*’ where the craft itself survives in a hybrid form that may or may not be produced by the original workers [11]. Advent of Industrial revolution revolutionized our traditional production system along with transport, made our village industry irrelevant.

The precarious condition of the artisans and the crafts is again highlighted when globalization has separated the crafts from the actual artisans.

India has distinguished craft heritage, so the export of Indian handicrafts should not be seen as the only parameter of development of this sector. There should be a push from the domestic market. The biggest problem while implementing the developmental schemes is the lack of proper knowledge on handicraft units

and number of artisans. Now a complete census of the artisan is need for proper statistics, which enable the government to plan the appropriate intervention.

#### **V. Suggestions on thematic issues :**

From methodological point of view, one can explore a variety of possible approaches to identify the “Status and Position of Artisans and Service castes” in the present Globalized ambience. There are three major themes across the study namely

1. Explore “Local Knowledge System”, it is argued that Artisans as creators of objects that are permeated with aesthetic value, organize their world’s according to conceptions that are not separate from the process of creation and production [12,13,14 ].
2. The study of formation of identities among Artisanal groups [15] enable us to understand, how the identities of the working class group have shifted over the period. The combination of history and sociology proves to be a fruitful method for teasing out the gradation of artisan identity.
3. The study of marginalization of Artisans in the context often dictated by Globalization and neo-liberal orthodoxies [16,17,18,19 ].

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