

# Indian Handicraft-A Way of Livelihood (With a Special Reference to the Basor Caste)

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**Abstract**—Indian Handicrafts are traditionally rich and diverse, and therefore distinguish it from the rest of world. Bamboo craft is a traditional craft, supporting several marginal livelihoods. Bamboo craft is one of the oldest crafts known to man. It is universally practiced at various regions throughout India. Bamboo crafts in India are very popular due to its eco friendly attributes. Since ancient times, bamboo crafts had been occupying a significant position as India produces a huge amount of bamboo. The Indian artisans are dexterous in creating bamboo crafts and arrays of bamboo items are famous in Indian as well as in abroad. Basically the artisans create variations in their creations. In Madhya Pradesh these are generally made by a community called Basor or Basod, who sell them in weekly markets. Shahdol, Balaghat, Mandla and Seoni regions of Madhya Pradesh are main bamboo producing centres apart from Chhattisgarh and Bastar. The Basor are a community of bamboo workers who have been marginalized by society. Basor are a caste which is usually regarded as a sub-caste of the Dom. The Basor are listed as a Scheduled Caste (SC) under the provisions of the Indian Constitution. They are also known as Bansor, Basar, Dumar, Bansphor, Bansodi, Baskar and Burud. The name of the Basor people is derived from the Hindi word bans, meaning bamboo. This caste has been considered low or 'untouchable' and been oppressed by the upper castes. A small population of Basor resides in the outskirts of Jabalpur city and their livelihood completely depends upon their handicrafts. The Basor continue in the traditional occupation of weaving baskets and other bamboo products like winnowing fans, mats, sieves, flutes and rattles which they sell at local markets and fairs. The article contains an overview about the status of Indian Handicrafts and also gives a glimpse of the crafts of the Basor community who earn their living through the craft.

**Keywords:** Handicraft, Bamboo, Livelihood, Basor

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is written, keeping in mind, the handicrafts of India and it emphasizes on the bamboo crafts of the Basor, a Scheduled Caste, which earns its living by crafting products made of bamboos.

Handicraft can be defined as a craft that needs skillful hands. Handcrafted products require labor and skill.

Handicrafts of India are rich and diverse in historically, traditionally, religiously and regionally. Each state in India is famous for some or the other crafts and also they diversify

from region to region and from people of various castes and tastes. The crafts of India have been valued throughout time; their existence today proves the efforts put into their preservation.

Bamboo crafts in India are very popular due to its eco friendly attributes. Since ancient times, bamboo crafts had been occupying a significant position as India produces a huge amount of bamboo and cane. The bamboo craft is associated with cane and bamboo, and had been a part of Indian crafts giving rise to the expression of tribal art and provided them livelihood. As India is blessed with deft artistry, these types of craft developed in this country very soon and with the changing of style and trend, the craft has developed its designs and deftly blended tradition with fashion. (1)

Basor caste is the professional caste of bamboo works. This particular caste is also known by several other names. Like for instance, Basor caste is also called as Bansphor, Dhulia and Burud. Basors have never entered into agriculture and have always worked with bamboos. However, due to deforestation, the bamboos required for making products have become scarce and the Basor who require bamboos have to procure them at a high price. (2)

Despite of having exquisite craftsmanship, we are somehow and somewhere lagging behind in promoting the livelihood of the artisans, either by the incompetency in promoting the craftworks or through the insufficient supply of raw materials. The artisans are having low income and their works are getting extinct, resulting in loss of traditionality and ethnicity.

## 2. LIVELIHOOD

A livelihood is a means of making a living. It encompasses people's capabilities, assets, income and activities required to secure the necessities of life. A livelihood is sustainable when it enables people to cope with and recover from shocks and stresses (such as natural disasters and economic or social upheavals) and enhance their well-being and that of future generations without undermining the natural environment or resource base. For instance, a fisherman's livelihood depends on the availability and accessibility of fish. Similarly, a

craftsman's livelihood depends upon the availability, accessibility and affordability of raw materials. (3)

### 3. INDIAN HANDICRAFT

India is known for its ethnicity. As far as art and culture is concerned, India features amongst the culturally rich countries in the world. The country is fortunate enough to possess some highly skilled artisans. They have increased the fame of Indian handicrafts around the globe. Many rural people still earn their livelihood from their creative pieces of art.

India is a manufacturing hub of varied kinds of handicrafts, which are popular even in international markets. The handicrafts sector is important for the Indian economy as it is one of the largest employment generators and accounts for a significant share in the country's exports. The states and regional clusters contribute significantly to handicrafts export. The Indian handicrafts industry is fragmented, with more than 7 million regional artisans and more than 67,000 exporters/export houses promoting regional art and craftsmanship in the domestic and global markets.

#### 3.1 Key Markets and Export Destinations

- In 2014–15, Indian handicrafts exports stood at US\$ 4.5 billion, up approximately 15.4 per cent over the previous year's exports. Exports of Indian handicrafts have increased at around 16.4 per cent since 2008–09.
- Indian handicrafts are exported across geographies, with the top 10 destinations being the US, the UK, the UAE, Germany, France, Latin American countries (LAC), Italy, the Netherlands, Canada and Australia.
- The US alone accounted for approximately 26.1 per cent of India's total handicraft exports in 2014–15. It was followed by the EU, which accounted for approximately 24.7 per cent.
- The UAE was the third-largest importer of Indian handicrafts, with imports worth US\$ 410 million in 2014–15. (4)

### 4. BAMBOO CRAFT

The Handicrafts of Bamboo is one of the oldest crafts known to man. It is universally practiced at various regions throughout India.

India has a rich source of bamboo materials, and the Indian artisans have a practice to produce stunning utility articles. These items are meant for household uses. In modern days, various forms of decorative items are also made out of bamboo. Generally the products of bamboo are of two types, namely articles required for day to day use and of medium quality, that are more suited to local requirements; and another type is articles of finer quality, both decorative and functional, to meet the requirements and tastes of more sophisticated markets. (5)

Basket and mat weaving is a major craft in Madhya Pradesh because of readily available bamboo. A variety of baskets and woven mats can be found at local haat (market) in Balaghat, Seoni, Chhindwara and Betul. Bamboo is a significant part of the rural life and is hugely used to manufacture utility articles. The community manufacturing and selling these handcrafted items in weekly bazaars are called as Basod or Basor. The tribal communities of Baiga, Gond and Korku are involved in this craft as well. (6)

### 5. BASOR CASTE

The Basor are a community of bamboo workers who have been marginalized by society. They are from the low Sudra caste (lowest class of servants and peasants), in the lowest tier of the four classes. They live mainly in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. They are also known as Bansor, Basar, Dumar, Bansphor, Bansodi, Baskar and Burud. The name of the Basor people is thought to be derived from the Hindi word bans, meaning bamboo.

The Basor are listed as a Scheduled Caste (SC) under the provisions of the Indian Constitution. This caste has been considered low or 'untouchable' and been oppressed by the upper castes. The SC status grants them many benefits such as specified quotas in government jobs, reserved seats in college-level courses like engineering and medicine and reserved seats in Parliament.

The Basor of Madhya Pradesh speaks the Indo-Aryan languages, Bundelkhandi or Jabalpuri, with its Devanagari script. Those living in Uttar Pradesh speak Bundelkhandi at home and local dialects of Hindi with others in the community. Marathi and Hindi are spoken in Maharashtra.

The Basor continue in the traditional occupation of weaving baskets and other bamboo products like winnowing fans, mats, sieves, flutes and rattles which they sell at local markets and fairs.

Literacy levels are much lower than the national average, especially for girls. As they are illiterate, they are ignorant of saving schemes or bank loans and other facilities available to them. (6)

### 6. BASOR AND BAMBOO CRAFT

The Basor make their living by making and selling bamboo products. They have never practiced agriculture and are totally dependent upon bamboo for their livelihood. The Basor mostly make household products but are also skilled in making decorative items.

In the Barela area of Jabalpur District reside around 200 households of the Basor. They procure bamboos, make products out of the bamboos and sell them at local markets or to the contractors. The contractors buy the bamboo products at a cheaper rate from the craftsmen and sell them at exhibitions, fairs and urban markets.

The cost of the products ranges from Rs. 20 to Rs. 250 depending upon the size, functionality and utility of the product. But when these products are sold to the contractors are sold at a comparatively cheaper rate. Supposedly, if a product's price is Rs. 50 then the contractor buys it at around Rs. 40.

The peak seasons for selling these products are harvesting season, marriage season and during pujas.

Earlier these Basors used to get bamboo from the nearby forests without investing any amount of money, but due to deforestation now they have to buy bamboo to make products out of them. "Nowadays there are no forests to look for bamboo. The bamboos are scarce in this region", said Satish Kumar Banskar a craftsman of Jabalpur.

The cost of each bamboo pole ranges from Rs. 50 to Rs. 100 or more depending upon the quality and size of the bamboo. Normally the height of each bamboo pole is around 10-12 ft.

### 6.1 Some Products Crafted by the Basor

**6.1.1 Tokri:** Tokris are baskets made by weaving bamboo strips. They are used for keeping cereals and other household goods.



Fig. 1: Tokri under construction

**Supa:** Supas are winnowing fans made by weaving bamboo strips but are used to separate dust particles and other unwanted particles from the food grains.



Fig. 2: Supa or Winnowing Fan under construction

**6.1.2 Tokni:** Toknis are similar to tokris but are shallower and do not have gaps in between the weaves.



Fig. 3: Tokni

**6.1.3 Dona:** Donas are bowls made by weaving bamboo strips. They are used for serving eatables.

**6.1.4 Bhatpasauni:** In Hindi "bhat" means rice, and "pasauna" means to drain. Hence it is used to drain off extra water after cooking rice.



Fig. 4: Bhatpasauni

## 7. PROBLEMS AND ISSUES FACED BY BASOR

According to the Basor residing in and around Jabalpur region there are several issues which are restricting them to enhance their livelihood. Some of the problems and issues are as follows:

### 7.1 Availability/ Unavailability of Bamboo

The Basor face the shortage of bamboo in their regions. Due to deforestation and usage of bamboo in making paper bamboo have been cut down to nil in several regions of Madhya Pradesh. Hence, the Basor now procure bamboo in order to make their products. The bamboos procured are very costly and their cost ranges from Rs. 50 to Rs. 100 depending upon the size and quality of the bamboo. According to the Basor, the tender and thinner bamboos are of good quality and henceforth produce quality goods.

## 7.2 Involvement of Middlemen

Most of the Basors sell their products to middlemen and contractors who buy them at a cheaper rate on a contract basis. These middlemen and contractors sell the products at fairs, exhibitions and urban markets at a higher price. If the Basors sell these products directly in the market then they can get a higher price.

## 7.3 Illiteracy and Unawareness

The literacy rate of the Basor is very low. According to the Census of India, the literacy rate of all SCs in Madhya Pradesh is 58.6%. The Basor along with five other castes namely Khatik, Katia, Khangar, Kumhar and Bagri constitute 12.3% of total SC population of the state. (7) The heavily rely on their craftsmanship and skills. They are unaware of various schemes and policies introduced by the government as they are limited to local haats and contractors or middlemen.

## 7.4 Insufficient Capital for Investment

The Basor do not have sufficient capital for investment. They rely on their savings for procurement of raw materials. Some Basors take loans or advance payments from the contractors and middlemen for procuring raw materials. For building a microenterprise they would need loan from banks or agencies. But to take these loans they do not have any collateral or deposit. Even if somehow they manage to build a microenterprise, finding a bigger market for selling their products is difficult.

## 7.5 Exposure to Urban Market

The Basor are not exposed to urban market. They do not know where to sell their products. They rely heavily on the middlemen and contractors. Some Basors know that if they sell their products in the urban market then they can get a better price for their work but due to lack of contacts of stores and agencies they are unable to sell their products directly to the urban market.

## 8. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

India is rich and diverse in its handicrafts. Many crafts are even appreciated and exported to foreign countries.

The bamboo craft of Basors is unique in its own way. The Basor make mostly household products out of bamboo. In many Hindu rituals and worships it is believed that it is auspicious to use products made by Doms, and the Basor being a sub-caste of Doms come in play.

The Basors are excellent craftsmen but are left behind in the society due to unavailability of natural resources, involvement of middlemen, illiteracy, insufficient capital and lack of exposure to urban markets.

If this caste works in small workgroups, develop micro or small enterprises and get direct linkages to urban markets, government agencies or private agencies then there will not be any involvement of middlemen or contractors and they can get a profitable income in order to get a sustainable livelihood.

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