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Learning about Crafts

If you look around your home, you will find a number of things used everyday that represent the heritage of Indian crafts. These may include:

- ◆ an embroidered cushion or pillow case
- ◆ a bamboo basket or chair woven with cane
- ◆ a piece of jewellery
- ◆ a *duree* or carpet
- ◆ a stone bowl
- ◆ a clay pitcher or *surahee*, or a lamp or *diya*
- ◆ a mat or a broom
- ◆ a handwoven *saree*



It is quite possible that one or more objects in this list have been replaced in your home by an industrial product. If that has happened, you can ask your parents about what they used before the modern object arrived.

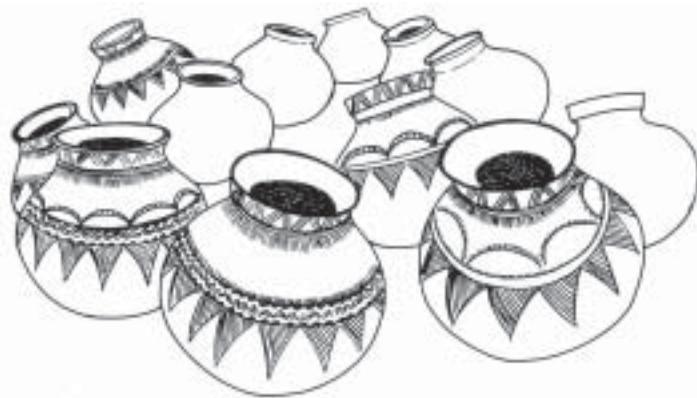
On the face of it, a broom or a mat, a shawl or a handwoven scarf may appear machine-made. On the other hand, you can find nylon mats in the market made mechanically, which look exactly like hand-woven straw mats. Unless you observe carefully you may not see much difference between the two. However, there is only superficial similarity between an object made by a craftsperson, and its copy made by a machine. When people talk about craftsmanship, they often have in mind machine-made perfection. However, the kind of perfection a work of craftsmanship represents is quite different from the mechanical perfection of a mass-produced object.

The difference comes from the traces of individuality that you can find in a hand-crafted object. These traces may look like marks of imperfection in comparison to the mechanically produced object. For instance, in a handmade bamboo fan, the surface may be rough in the part where the bamboo had a knot. The natural texture of the bamboo continues to live in a handmade fan. In a comparable plastic copy of the fan, the surface will be smooth everywhere,



and every fan will look identical. Contrary to this uniformity, each craft product is different even if it looks similar to others. A hand-woven sari has no exact match, just as a handkerchief you make with your own hands is unique.

All traditional crafts are practised in communities, not individually. The man or woman who practises a traditional craft inherits it from senior members of the community, usually while growing up in the family. The knowledge and skills involved in any craft are diverse, starting from basic knowledge about the material with which the craft is practised, the tools with which it is made, to the numerous skills applied in order to transform the material into a work of aesthetic beauty and of daily use.



Let us, for example, look at a pitcher or a flower-pot. The material used for making it is the most basic and perhaps the oldest resource used for the practice of pottery as a craft. The right kind of clay is first collected, then cleaned and treated, and then turned

into pots of desired shapes with the help of a potter's wheel. Once a pitcher is given shape, it is fired in a kiln in order to make it strong. In each of these stages, numerous skills are involved. The potter must also maintain several levels of awareness while applying his skill, in order to ensure that the end product has its basic, reliable quality and beauty.

Beauty and Use

Aesthetic beauty and usefulness need not be two separate qualities. In modern times we sometimes feel that something to be used in everyday life need not be beautiful, or that something beautiful cannot be put to daily use. We assume that if an object is to be used frequently, it need not be delicate and graceful. This assumption is quite mistaken in the context of traditional crafts. The best way to understand why this is so, is by making something with your own hands.

Try making an object of daily use in your life as a student. If you have no experience of stitching and embroidery, you can still try to make a small book mark, by wrapping a small, rectangular cardboard with a piece of cloth which has a design like a flower or a leaf embroidered on it. In order to make such a bookmark you will need to take several decisions. Each decision will draw your attention in two directions: one, towards the choice of cloth, its colour, the embroidery and its colour; and two,



towards your own likes and dislikes in these matters. When you start the actual cutting and stitching, you will go through a series of thoughts and emotions. You will feel pleased with yourself when the rectangular cardboard is wrapped up and stitched tightly with the cloth you have selected. You will feel somewhat irritated with yourself if one of the corners does not look as neat and angular as the other three corners do. Ultimately, when the work is finished and the bookmark is ready, you will feel pleased with yourself in a strange sense.

This is an example which can help you appreciate how craft products combine beauty with use. The imperfect piece of work will look so intimate that you will look at its blemishes, like a blunt corner, with affection. A sense of personal relation with the object in hand will give it, in your eyes, a beauty that more perfect-looking bookmarks made of metal and plastic may not have. The secret lies in the point that a craft product does not pretend to be perfect, it only *aspires* to be perfect.

This is what makes it so human. As human beings, we too can only aspire to be perfect in whatever we do, but we can never be perfect. Even the Taj, which is a great work of craftsmanship, and is rightly regarded as one of the wonders of the world, is not perfect. If you visit the Taj and look at it carefully, you will find that it expresses a deep aspiration to be perfect, even as it reveals many examples where the individual sculptor has left his own mark which prevents the overall design from looking purely mechanical. The reason why craftwork is so satisfying may well be because it represents a deep urge in us to reach higher and higher levels of perfection. What does the word *imperfection* mean? Before we enter the world of different craft forms discussed in this book, let us think about the meaning we can give to the word *imperfection* in the context of crafts. There are two ways in which we can proceed in this search. One is to reflect on the experience that working on a craft brings to us. The other way is to examine the outcome of our work, and look for aspects of perfection in the product.



The Experience of Craft Work

It is easy to say that the work involved in any craft is mainly of a manual kind, in the sense that craft work is done with the help of physical effort on our part. When we make a small *diya* of clay or a garland of flowers *mala* our eyes and hands are actively engaged. However, if we look at this kind of work more deeply, we will notice that it is not purely manual. A great deal of mental attention is required at every stage, and at certain points we must concentrate on what we are doing, otherwise the *mala* we are making may not turn out well. Each flower has to be accommodated in the *mala* with care and concern for its individual character, size and colour. It must have space, good company, and the needle must pierce it without injury. If we have made a *diya* many times we may get so good at it that we don't need to think about it all the time. In other words, we get so skilled at this work that our hands and eyes carry on without conscious decisions being made by the mind.

You must have noticed how a tailor can continue to work on his machine while talking. A barber can do the same thing. But even a highly skilled tailor or barber does pay attention to what he is doing if he does not want to make mistakes. Perhaps what happens is that the mind and the body together enter into a rhythm of work. Certain decisions which are of a routine kind get taken without too much thought, hence the person can keep talking while his hands are working; but at certain moments when something crucial is to be done, the mind

takes full control and guides the eyes and the hands to focus on the work itself. This remarkable unity of body and mind in craft work is what makes it a pleasant and deeply satisfying experience.

If you have never attempted to learn any kind of traditional craft till now, you might have ignored the two suggestions given earlier in this chapter, i.e., to make a book mark and a *mala*. You still need a personal taste of making something with your hands in order to get the taste of mind-body experience. So, here is yet another suggestion, for something simpler than the earlier examples.

