

livelihoods

today and tomorrow

August 2018

‘Sukshetram’

Carpenters

Wood is one of mankind’s oldest building materials. The ability to shape wood improved with technological advances from the Stone Age through the Bronze Age and right to the Iron Age. Carpentry is the skilled profession in which the primary work performed is on wood which includes cutting, shaping and installation of building materials during the construction of building, ships, timber bridges, etc.. Looking back over time, the community’s contribution from a global point of view is immense and immeasurable.



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wooden buildings in the world such as temples in China, including Nanchan Temple built in 782, the Greensted Church, parts of which are from the 11th century, and the Stave Churches in Norway from the 12th and 13th centuries.

Carpenters traditionally work with natural wood and do rougher work such as framing. It is also common that the skill can be learned by gaining work experience other than a formal training program, which may be the case in many places. In our country, we have Vishwakarmas, also known as Vishwabrahmins, who trace their descent from the god Vishwakarma. In today’s time, they denote a community or group of castes of artisans. This group comprises of goldsmiths, carpenters, blacksmiths, copper smiths, stone-masons, etc. Aside from being known as Vishwabrahmins, they are also called as Panchal meaning specialized in five different works; Kavi, Madhvi, Suhastasour and Narashansa, (identical castes in ancient Vedic reference) Rathakar, because they used to make chariots for ancient kings; and Karmmalar in Madras. The name differs depending on which side - Northern or Southern side of India- they are from.. There are many more names associated with the Vishwakarmas.

Being an occupational caste of carpenters and wood carvers, they make furniture, wooden ploughs, harrows, and other agricultural tools as carpenters for people of villages and towns. In Uttar Pradesh (UP) alone, they number around 2.6 million. Across India, they speak various languages based on their geographical location. In Northern India, they speak Hindi, Bhojpuri, Pahari, Punjabi and use Devanagiri and Gurmukhi script. In Southern India, they speak various local languages with dialects. Literacy level among the community is low, as many families are continuing their traditional occupation, and are unable to afford to send their children to school beyond secondary for boys and up to primary for girls.

The community is generally endogamous, but they are also exogamous in a few states. Women’s role in this community is mostly restricted to housework that includes collecting fuel, fodder and fetching water. Women are active in participating in social and religious ceremonies. The community has a rich oral tradition of folksongs, dances and tales that they often share with other communities. In Himachal Pradesh, “Nati” is a popular folk dance, which both men and women participate in! Social control is handled by elders and respected members of the community. They celebrate all the major Hindu festivals.

The community had always played a vital role in Indian village economy, and they consider themselves as missionaries of civilization, culture, religion, and spread out their art. Their identity has always been strongly tied to their profession, and the knowledge and skills are passed down from person to person orally, and rarely in writing. The community forms an important component of non-farm segment i.e., unorganized sector of workers, especially in the rural population, and therefore, the community has always been regarded as a custodian of the heritage of India. Moreover, they also play an important role in the village life through their repairs and maintenance services.

The community used to make agriculture implements and lived in the midst of the village, but if and when the

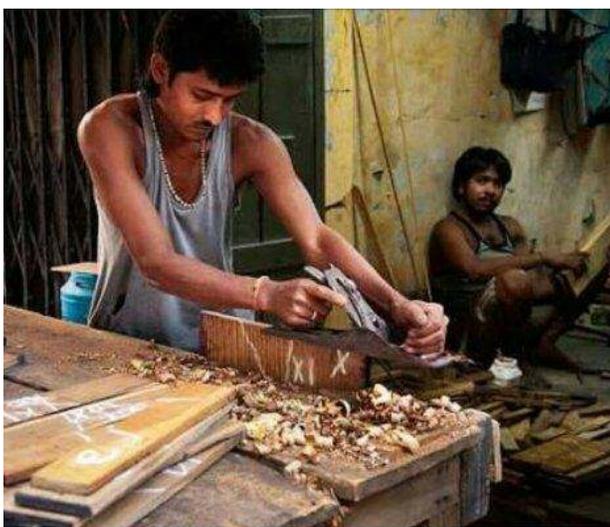
village was small, they used to, and even today continue to, take work from other villages in order to earn a decent livelihood. They made yoke and other wooden implements for ploughing, the handle for hoes, spades, axes, weeding tools, sickles and other necessary implements for agriculture purposes and for irrigating land. But with the arrival of tractors and other modern agriculture implements, the demand for traditional implements, which need wood and carpentry skills, is slowly declining.

Carpentry is a highly skilled job and there are different variations of work; for instance- a finish carpenter is the one who does finish carpentry i.e, cabinetry, furniture making, fine woodworking, model building, instrument making, parquetry, joinery or other carpentry,

Achari, Achari Thacher, Achary, Akkasale, Asari, Asari Oddi, Brahmalu, Chettian, Chola, Gejjigar, Kamar, Kammalan, Kammalar, Kammiyar, Kamsala, Kannalan, Kannalar, Kollar Ponkollar, Manu, Mukkuvar, Ojali, Ozuu, Pancha Brahma, Panchal, Panchal Brahma, Panchala, Pandithattan, Pandya, Pathuria, Shilpi, Silpi, Sozhia, Sthapathi, Sthapathulu, Sutar, Thocher, Vaddra, Vishvakarma, Vishwa Brahman, Vishwa Brahmin, Vishwabrahman, Vishwakarma, Viswa Brahman, Viswabrahma, Viswabrahman, Viswajana, Viswakammala, Vojali, Waggai, विस्वाकर्मा.

where exact joints and minimal margins of error are important. There are also joiners in carpentry, who have a much broader skill ranging from joinery, finishing carpentry, building construction and other forms of work. There is also trim carpenters, who specialize in molding and trimming such as door and window casings, mantels, baseboards and other types of ornamental work, as they do fine and detailed work specializing in making of storage chests and other furniture designed for storage.

Nowadays, the number of people from the community continuing in the profession is declining. There are various reasons including; carpenters continuing to be old-fashioned in usage of technology and their far from satisfactory



economic status, which, apart from crippling them financially, makes their marketing power also weak at both selling and buying levels. The education levels too are low and their linkages with rural developmental institutions are either weak or non-existent. Today, we have this artisan community in decline and the key reasons for problems faced by them are lack of skills, less exposure to information and technology, lack of formal training, absence of non-farm policy, marketing support, non-competitive products, unable to thrive under competition, and lack of wooden resources with depletion of forests, use of new types of materials such as glass, aluminum and other metals in housing and application of traditional left-over technologies.

With growth of towns and cities, these people are migrating from rural areas and a few of the families have set up flourishing furniture shops in markets in towns and cities. In a few states such as Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, they are also a landowning community and have other livelihoods such as agriculture and horticulture as a secondary occupation. In states like Punjab, the community is engaged in metallurgy and mastery, in addition to carpentry. Due to poor economic opportunities, in parts of Punjab they are also engaged in daily-wage labour, while others have shifted to private or government service. The younger generation of the community does not find the traditional occupation interesting anymore. In the forested belt of Himachal Pradesh, many of them are employed by the Forestry Department as labourers to cut timber. Educated youngsters have diversified their livelihoods by joining as teachers and in Defense Forces.

Artisans form the backbone of non-farm rural economy in India with an estimated 7 million of the rural population engaging in the sector for their livelihoods. They operate at the cluster level with each cluster making one or more crafts and producing variety of product types.

The development of various technologies led to the beginning of the decline of traditional timber framing, and by 20th century, concrete and hand-held power tools, wire

nails and machines to mass-produce screws came to be in common use and allowed carpenters to do away with heavy timber sills. Plywood, engineered lumber and chemically treated lumber also came into use. With industrialization and more recently globalization, the traditional artisan trade has been greatly affected. The economic and technological forces are buffeting their profession to extinction. Also, there is a sort of identity crisis; unable to identify with the upper castes or the lower castes. Their socio-economic status varies from a very high level to the very low level in different parts of India, as they earn high wages in towns because of factory employment, while in villages, their earnings are low.

Carpentry requires training, which involves both acquiring knowledge and physical practice, there are formal training courses as a carpenter begins as an apprentice after his tenth standard. Carpenters for years learn skills by observation and peripheral assistance, formal training in carpentry trade, which is available, certificate programs, high-school programs, online classes in new construction, restoration and preservation carpentry fields. Fully trained carpenters and joiners often move into related trades, such as shop fitting, scaffolding, bench joinery, and maintenance and system installation.

Along with dealing with the shift in architecture models, designs and materials use, the community is facing a severe resource crunch; resource-poor artisans cannot afford skill up-gradation at the cost of their livelihood earning. Furthermore, they are being neglected by State & Central Governments, as they are non-covered under Agricultural Relief Programmes and are non involved in rural development programmes, lack of skill improvement and technology up-gradation, lack of specialized markets, non-existence of infrastructural facilities, non-availability of quality raw materials, weak financial power, inability to get bank loans and poor access to information, lack of linkages with different developmental institutions and lack of social security mechanisms.

Various materials used traditionally are natural wood, which is prepared by splitting (riving), hewing or sawing with pit saw or sawmill.

The community suffers from occupational health hazards too! Occupational lung diseases are very high among them, as they are exposed to various chemicals or toxins which are manufactured or processed in industries. More importantly, as the carpenters are constantly inhaling wood dust during jointing, cutting etc., in wood industrial sectors, they are vulnerable to

airborne hazards. Effects of wood dust on respiratory health of carpenters are very bad. Their working conditions are very poor as they work in confined spaces without protective devices and poor ventilation at work place and do not use masks.

The occupation often involves hazardous work depending on types of wood working; which mainly include machine hazards, flying materials, tool projections, fire, explosion, electrocution, noise, vibration, dust and chemicals. The implementation of Occupational Safety and Health Administration is very poor (OSHA). In construction sector, the employers must provide working conditions that are free to

Traditional village carpenter makes ornamental doorposts and also doors, rafters, plain bedsteads and stools of various sizes for domestic use. The community holds portable cars for taking idols in procession bullock carts.

- We have different types of skilled carpenters; a few are given below:*
- Ship carpenter, who is specialized in ship building, maintenance, repair techniques and carpentry specific to nautical needs.*
 - Shipwright carpenter, who builds wooden ships on land.*
 - Cooper, who makes barrels.*
 - Scenic carpenter, who builds and dismantles temporary scenery and sets in film making.*
 - Framer, who specializes in building skeletal structure or wooden framework of building.*
 - Luthier, who makes and repairs stringed instruments.*
 - Formwork carpenter, who creates the shuttering and falsework used in concrete construction.*
 - Conservation carpenter, who works in architectural conservation.*
 - Green carpenter, who specializes in environment friendly, energy-efficient and sustainable sources of building materials for use in construction projects.*
 - Recycled carpenter, who uses scrap wood and parts of discarded materials to build new wood products.*
 - Restoration carpenter, who works in historic building restoration.*

known dangers. Safety is not just about the workers on the job site, but carpenters’ work needs to meet the requirements in the Life Safety Code - these include stair building, building codes to promote long term quality and safety for the building occupants.

Artisan and agriculture nexus is one of the key pillars of village economy. Over a period of time, there are shifts in modes of production and commercialization.

The challenges faced by this unorganized sector are linked with the dismal state of infrastructure and communication network in India. Appalling road conditions, poor networks, no electricity for many non-farm units, are some of the key market hurdles in promotion and propagation of non-farm activities like carpentry. Accelerated by problems of inappropriate and unorganized markets in elastic output, lack of timely and qualitative input supplies, high input prices, inappropriate pricing, stiff competition from organized and big industries, lack of innovation and poor trade practices, etc., has led to disappearance of traditional non-farm activities across many parts of our country.

Another huge constraint faced by them is that of raising loans from money lenders, as there are no financial linkages, which has seen a steep rise in moneylender services in rural and non-farm sector. Poor rural credit markets, repayment capacity, high rates of interest and other factors are impeding the community’s growth and expansion in their skilled livelihood. On the other hand, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime was sold as a reform, however, it is far from the reality, and the lives of crafts people across India have been hit! The crafts sector is one of the most sustainable and green parts of the economy. The GST has impacted the sector hard, with lots of the crafts people losing their livelihoods. Already a good chunk of their population has taken to other livelihoods. This traditional occupation in villages, which once reflected the base of the socio-economic culture prevalent in the rural areas of the country, is slowly declining.

E-Commerce is totally changing the way we are buying furniture! Yes, we are going online to shop, and furniture is expected to become one of the largest categories in the rapidly growing Indian e-commerce! The furniture sector has mostly been unorganized with close to 80% of the industry run by individual carpenters. We have now Sweden’s IKEA coming to the Indian shores, which could be a game changer. What the traditional carpentry community is missing out on is the fact that many of the brands which are online furniture retailers offer a wide variety of modern designs, added with convenience of delivery and assembling. There is a wide gap in availability and desirability in the furniture industry in India, and the traditional stores are not able to offer that variety!

Many traditional workers such as blacksmiths, goldsmiths, cobblers, potters and washer-men are slowly disappearing. The occupation scenario in rural areas has also changed mainly due to the changing economic setting. The invention of new technologies has encouraged the villagers to take up new occupations. In light of the above-mentioned facts, how do we restore dignity to the traditional livelihoods?

In modern times, with increased internet penetration in rural parts of the country, there is a great opportunity to digitally promote the products. The road ahead is technology, which has a pivotal role to play in bridging the gap between grass root artisans and global buyers. We need to organize carpenters in to collectives and cooperatives to provide new skills, tools and market linkages. We need to work with buyer profiles i.e., end customers to provide easy access to the products through dashboards, as the community lacks proper infrastructure and distribution channels to market their products to the masses. ❖