

Status of Malaysian Handicrafts in Social-Cultural and Economic Development

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For Malaysia, handicrafts have been a source of income for the rural economy. It also embodies the cultural tradition of the Malays. The development of indigenous handicrafts in Malaysia can be said to span over the three decades, from the period before Malaysia's independence, to the present. Over the years, national policies, infrastructure and development plans for handicrafts have been formulated as part of a strategy to develop rural industries and employment for the rural population.

Prior to the first Malaysian Plan (1966-1970), this task was entrusted to the agency known as RIDA, the Rural Industrial Development Authority.

RIDA'S commitment to relegating the status of craft activities foresaw the need to establish a Small Industrial Services Institute. Through the institute, programmes and services were extended to craft-makers and such programmes and services

included research and development, marketing research, technical skill, technology transfer and credit facilities.

Several years later, the Council of Trust for the Development of Indigenous People, in short, MARA took over the functions of RIDA. This period saw the creation of the Handicraft Development Centre and the expansion of research programmes such as the establishment of Extension Services Centres on the east coast of Malaysia, the home of traditional handicrafts.

Realizing the importance of cottage industries the Government then, in 1974, established the Malaysian Handicrafts Board under MARA, as a national agency to oversee problems of the handicrafts industry. During this time emphasis was given to provide extension services to other craft areas such as wood carving, pottery, bamboo and rattan work, which in the past had been left to develop on their own. As a result new development centres were opened in other parts of the country.

The third Malaysia Plan (1976-1980) focused on agricultural development in which handicrafts is a major concern. Since handicrafts were considered a vital issue in the rural industrialization development programme, the Handicrafts Board was given larger scope, functions and responsibilities.

In order to give the Handicrafts Board greater authority, the next step taken by the Government, then, was to dissolve the Handicrafts Board and to create a statutory body which would deal with the overall development of cottage industries. Hence, the Malaysian Handicrafts Development Corporation (MHDC) was established in 1979.

MALAYSIAN HANDICRAFTS DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

MHDC's main objective is to stimulate participation in, encourage and promote traditional skills and handicrafts into becoming a commercially viable concern, and to foster its growth from cottage

industry to small-scale industry. As a national corporation responsible for the overall development of handicrafts MHDC provides training and advisory services through its eight development centres situated in different states of Malaysia.

These centres provide training in handloom weaving, matting, woodcarving, silverware, brassware, pottery, rattan and bamboo ware, hornware and batik. These centres also provide design and product development and promotion advisory services.

The most significant contribution made by MHDC in terms of craft visibility is the design output. The impact can be seen through the creative expressions which manifest new modes of thinking and vision. Nonetheless, they still reflect the essence and richness of the indigenous craft tradition. MHDC has a group of talented and experienced designers trained both locally and abroad who are in charge of ensuring that the designs are up to par for the world markets. The designers usually conceptualize their new designs on paper, bearing in mind the limitations of practicality and cost restraints. The designer then goes to the craftsmen who he thinks can create what's drawn on the paper. Occasionally the end product may not be what the designer had in mind, or the workmanship is not flawless due to the intricacy involved. Then it's up to the designer to modify, re-adjust or even give it up totally if it is found to be unfeasible. Sometimes a prototype is also made in the studio.

Realizing the importance of design as a strategy for revitalizing traditional products, a national craft competition named WICITRA was launched in 1982 by MHDC. The main aim is to foster innovative ideas and also to encourage design consciousness. This competition, which is held biennially, has created much interest among designers and craftsmen from all over the states of Malaysia.

This competition provides the opportunity for designers and crafts- persons to express their creative talents, drawing upon the traditions and blending them with the needs of the contemporary crafts setting. It also serves to bring together leaders in industry and professionals and crafts experts not only as jury members but also to offer opinions and suggestion.

Because of the encouraging response, more competitions were held again in 1984, 1986 and 1988 respectively.

Honouring master craftsmen is a scheme widely practiced in many countries as a recognition of their contributions to the nation. Incentives of different types such as cash awards, honorary titles and study tours have been given as prizes in appreciation of their contributions and artistic skills.

A similar programme named the Adigurn Craft Scheme was launched in mid-1986. Masters in wood carving, embroidery, basketry and metal smithing were identified and honoured under this scheme. Master craftsmen agreed to allow a

documentation of their lives and works to be recorded and special arrangements were made for the transfer of their particular skills. It is hoped that future generations of craftsmen will benefit from this systematic compilation of records and achievements.

CRAFT AWARENESS PROGRAMME

Under MHDC several new projects have been initiated to meet varying needs and for the purpose of creating awareness within Malaysian society. As an experiment, an International Craft Museum was established in which foreign countries donated various items typical of their craft heritage. The International Crafts Museum plays an important role in educating the people beyond its traditional role in preserving the art and craft heritage of a nation. As a house of knowledge, it provides local craftsmakers with the opportunity to learn the similarities and to compare the differences of craft traditions.

A National Crafts Museum was established soon after to house national crafts treasures and to preserve the works of master craftsmen. The collection covers a wide range of traditional cultural items from various states of Malaysia and includes award winning pieces of national craft competitions.

While craft exhibitions and demonstrations have remained a popular mode for harnessing public awareness, it was, however, felt that a permanent comprehensive craft information centre was essential. As a manifestation of this desire and need,

Infokraf Malaysia was instituted in 1986. Infokraf acts as a centre for information on the latest developments taking place in the crafts scene. As a national centre for culling the stands of creativity, Infokraf houses the Library and Documentation Centre, and exhibition halls which include a permanent hall which is specially designed to display new products.

The scope of activities conducted by Infokraf was also expanded to include Sunday craft bazaars where craftsmakers can promote and sell crafts items. Infokraf also provides a useful contact point for craft administrators, and for potential craft exchange programmes.

MARKETING OUTLET

A centre for marketing handicrafts items was established with funds initially made available through the World Bank. The marketing organization known as Karyaneka (meaning variety of creations) serves as a marketing outlet which has a backup production network. Karyaneka is actually a handicraft village composed of 14 traditional Malay-style houses representing all the states of Malaysia.

Each house exhibits and sells handicrafts from the respective state. Within the village there is a main showroom selling a wide range of unique and colourful handicrafts, both with traditional and contemporary designs.

Karyaneka was set up in December 1981 by the Malaysian Government

under the Ministry of Agriculture and was later moved to the Ministry of National and Rural Development.

Karyaneka's prime objective is to upgrade the standard of living of the rural people by helping them to market their handicraft products. To date, Karyaneka now has 22 sales outlets all over Malaysia. To name a few, the Rusila branch in the east coast of Terengganu, Kuching in East Malaysia, Batu Ferringhi in Penang, Air Keroh in Malacca, the National Museum, the Subang International Airport and many more.

Aggressive promotional efforts carried out by Karyaneka have gained rewards and placed Malaysian handicrafts in the international limelight. Most handicrafts are exported to Singapore, Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America. Although the export volume is modest, the demand from overseas markets have been encouraging, prompting Karyaneka to initiate expansion plans.

CONCLUSION

The role of the Government in stimulating the direction and growth of cottage industries has resulted in building new confidence among craftsmakers. The drive to create public awareness has also created the demand for authentic indigenous crafts.

The general interest and response on the part of craftsmakers to these issues have produced quality up-market items to meet the need of consumers, apart from fulfilling the

needs of the general public.

Two distinct factors can be attributed to achievements in the product development process. Firstly the designers who are locally trained from the MARA Institute of Technology have introduced new design concepts. Secondly the input from foreign consultancies elevate indigenous forms to forms of expression. These two factors have brought about the development of new products which have been

introduced to the market.

Handicrafts in Malaysia today continue to be symbolically linked with the rural people through the rural industrialization programme. The economic base of handicrafts, however, has caught on as an entrepreneurial opportunity for young persons, thus providing an avenue for income-generating in the rural and urban areas.

Broadening of the craft base will

continue to provide the required environment and incentive, necessary for crafts to survive as a living tradition. As long as this situation prevails, craftsmakers will continue express their creative talents.

As a society, Malaysians will continue to take pride in their craft heritage and in doing so, assure a place for craft makers in the community and the world at large for the everlasting of excellence in craftsmanship.