

Research Diary

“Why would anyone want to buy folk paintings at a time like this?” How the COVID-19 is affecting an artisanal household in Telangana

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Even as the Prime Minister appeared on national television yesterday just before announcing lockdown 2.0 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, members of Danalakota household (living in Uppal a suburb in Hyderabad), like many viewers across the nation, had already anticipated that their hopes to actually leave their homes and conduct business, as usual, were already bleak. Like many of us, business is also on their minds. But unlike many of ours, theirs is a business that has always faced the fear of getting crippled. They are part of what many economists have called the ‘sunset industry’ of India, the handloom and handicraft sector.

Vaikuntam Danalakota, his wife Vanaja, and their three children – Sakshi, Rakesh and Vinay – belong to the community of traditional painters, wood-workers and sculptors in Telangana, called Nakash. Till 2013 the family lived and worked in Cheriya, 80km from Hyderabad; the place also lends its name to the narrative paintings that the family produces, ‘Cheriyal Paintings’ registered as a Geographical Indication. Their decision to move to Hyderabad was motivated by the fact that bulk of their customers and retail clients, including Lepakshi Handicrafts Emporium (of erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh) and Golconda Handicrafts Emporium (of the new Telangana state), are located in the capital. Today the family works out of their two-bedroom home producing intricately painted canvases, boxes, figurines and plates.

They also only recently expanded their customer base, by publishing their work on social media platforms, and communicating with distant clients via WhatsApp, to who finished work is couriered. Canvases being passed

from one family member to another, brushes being dipped in small containers of colour, unfinished paintings lying around, finished paintings rolled-up, colour-stained corners, and a fair number of awards and photographs of Vanaja and Vaikuntam receiving them punctuating the walls – these are some of the things which one notices when one walks into their house on an ordinary day.



But these are not ordinary days. The profusion of activity has come to a halt in this house in Uppal. ‘We are usually really busy’, says Rakesh, Vaikuntam’s eldest son, who is also a trained mechanical engineer, but is completely involved in the family practice. ‘On most days we begin work around 7 in the morning, and it could go on till 8-9 at night. In the middle, we also need to do the cooking, cleaning and other chores. But now we barely have enough work to occupy us for even a few hours.

The lockdown, first announced on 24 March, came as a shock to the family, who like most of the country, was not prepared. “We didn’t expect a complete lockdown for three weeks”, says Rakesh. “If we knew this would happen we would be better prepared. Our work involves some essential raw materials. We need to source cloth on which we do our paintings, we need to source colour, and our work requires a very specific kind of glue, which is not available everywhere in the city. Usually, we keep enough stock for 15 days, depending upon the quantum of work. But when this lockdown was announced, we didn’t get a chance to go and stock on materials. Getting food and groceries is not difficult because those are ‘essential’ items. But for artisans like us, colour and other items without which we cannot work is also absolutely essential”.

Research Diary

Rakesh laments that they ran out of supplies two weeks after the first lockdown was announced. As a result, the family is unable to produce new work and keep it ready once retail markets eventually open. But a bigger concern for the family is the volume of finished paintings, which is rolled and piled up in one corner of the house. “If we were informed even a week before that there was going to be a lockdown, we would have put in more hours, finished the work, sent them to our clients, so that they could pay us. Now that the work is finished, we have no option but to wait till 3 May to be able to courier it to our customers. Our payments are stuck, and we can only hope that our customers will not backtrack. One never knows. Everyone fears financial cringe. Why would anyone want to pay for folk paintings at a time like this?”



With ‘work-from-home’ becoming the acceptable norm, many businesses and companies that ordinarily require employees to be in offices can sustain themselves through virtual participation. On the other hand, it seems that this lockdown presents a huge disadvantage for many artisanal families like Rakesh’s whose work was always located within the home. This certainly is an irony, but the COVID-19 crisis has also exposed the kind value that we as a society place on certain kinds of work, namely artisanal work.

Vaikuntam is fully aware of the kind of priority the handicraft industry is given within the larger scheme of the economy. ‘The coming months are going to be tough for my family. In the current situation, companies are running at a loss. But what the government must understand is that most small artisanal households get a lot of work from companies. A bulk of our orders is actually corporate gifts – small paintings, painted boxes, etc., which we keep getting throughout the year. We fear that companies in an attempt to cost-cut will stop placing such orders. Handicrafts are after all considered decorative items; people can do without them. I feel it will take at least 8 months to one year for businesses and corporate houses to recover. Until that happens artisans will face a severe crisis.’”



One can only wait and see what plans the Ministry of Textiles, that encompass the handloom and handicraft industries of this country, has to boost the handicraft sector. But it does seem strange that members of a sector that is considered the largest generator of employment after agriculture and have a high potential for foreign exchange, perceive themselves as engaging in some only ‘decorative’, some dispensable. While governments celebrate individual artisans, including Vaikuntam, with Master Craftsman Awards, and avow them as the true bearers of India’s technological and aesthetic heritage, the revivalist attempt during post COVID-19 needs to extend beyond rhetoric.

Research Diary

Because Vaikuntam has been supplying to various Andhra Pradesh and Telangana state emporiums across the country for the last three decades, he has a grounded understanding of what artisans should expect from respective state governments. “It is only fair that a time like this the government steps up and ensures that we are able to sell what we produce. In fact, each state government should buy local handicrafts of their region. Organizing exhibitions will not be enough to salvage our situation. Each state government should encourage the different departments – Electricity, Municipal Corporation, Engineering, Health, Transport and Civil – to support local handicrafts; they can do this by using artisanal products in their offices, and by offering them as gifts during formal events and visits. Without this kind of intervention from state governments, artisans across the country will suffer.”

The COVID-19 epidemic has affected the lives of millions in 210 different countries across the world. But more significant is how a history of technological and transnational relations has led us to a situation where the effects of the epidemic in a country like the United States and the United Kingdom doubly complicate situations in other already affected countries. Rakesh points out that a number of their Telugu clients in Hyderabad have relatives who are diaspora in countries like the United State, United Kingdom and France. This was another growing customer-base that the family had just started exploring. “A lot of our Telugu clients would recommend our work to their relatives living abroad and order on their behalf.

The situation would not have been so dire if we could rely upon orders from those places till the situation in India stabilizes; but America, the United Kingdom and France are the worst affected, more than India.”

Despite uncertainties about the future, and especially about whom they could turn to, these artists are making sure that their work has relevance, especially during the exceptional time.

Vinay, who is Vaikuntam’s youngest son, over the last week has made two paintings depicting the themes of ‘Stay at Home’ and ‘Social Distancing’. Imagined through their collective style, these paintings testify the kind of innovation and resilience these artists are capable of demonstrating. “This period is going to go down in history. I thought we should represent it through our medium of expression. Nakashi paintings have always depicted what is happening in society. So we are simply continuing that tradition.”



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