



## Traditional Caste Craftsmanship and its present condition

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### Summary:

The following research paper is majorly an argument to the ancient and traditional way of implementation of thoughts or knowledge that has been governed by Indian Knowledge System (IKS) since a very longer period now. The paper particularly focuses on the traditional craftsmanship and those artisans' castes that are being affected today when we say that caste system is responsible for their occupational barriers. The present condition of artisans is unlikely showing us the facts that are neglected by IKS and caste system in India. The position and status of craftsmen caste is still defined by the caste boundaries that plays crucial role in IKS. In the era of globalization, we can try and preserve our cultural traditions but at the same time accepting the factual preferences regarding the handmade crafts and their respective artisans is the need of an hour.

**Keywords:** Craftsmanship, traditional castes, artisans, caste system, Indian Knowledge System (IKS)

### Introduction to Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and Caste System

As far as the caste system in our country is concerned, it is a traditionally dominated system that has influenced many generations. The caste system in India is strongly interconnected with the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), as it has made a significant mark on IKS. Caste system has played an important role in shaping the knowledge systems that has built the broad range of disciplines. Now, as we know the caste system is known for its hierarchical social structure based on birth, an ascribed status after birth and who/which community of people has access to knowledge, its transmission and development within the Indian society.

The impact of caste system on IKS is in such a way that the knowledge system has been formalized and institutionalized within the specific communities. It has limited the flow and sharing of knowledge access across different social groups. The categorization of Indian caste system into four primary segments- Brahmins (the intellectuals), Kshatriyas (the warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (Traders and Farmers) and the Shudras (labourers and servants). Untouchables were those who were excluded and deprived of the fundamental entitlements. IKS profound the rich reservoir of knowledge including traditional Indian philosophy and arts of ancient India. The availability of this knowledge has greatly influenced and impacted by caste. The caste system has already defined the groups that are privileged can have the access to the divine knowledge and those groups which stands below the hierarchy of social strata has been divided according to their respective occupation. Indian Knowledge System has followed the same structural division of labour that transmits the information and perpetuation of hierarchical system of work. Due to the inter-generational transmission, individuals belonging to lower castes frequently have restricted availability of knowledge and IKS has been profoundly propagating the boundaries derived from the Indian Caste System.

IKS, of course offers the sustainable livelihoods, traditional skills, and community-based solutions, that complements the efforts by reviving the traditional occupations like agriculture, handicrafts and local crafts. While its focus is on community-centric solutions that ensures fulfilling the community or local needs for effective unemployment solutions, but the present scenario of unemployment issues within certain traditional castes is not serving the effective solutions as it needs to be. Now, where IKS and caste system in India stand interconnected so as to preserve the traditional and cultural significance of the hierarchical social structure of the society, it is also important to see in the context of globalization. In particular with the traditional castes, the cultural identity of Indian caste system needs to be seen through glocalization that refers to adapt global strategies and solution in local form. At the same time the significance of the traditional Indian social structure is needed to be enlighten.

### Sociologists take on Traditional Caste System – an argument to IKS

Indeed, the sociologists considered IKS as a rich repository of wisdom and practices as well as vast discipline of knowledge. They do not just see IKS as an aspect entirely, but also the significance of caste system in it. So, they offer diverse perspectives on the relationship between both the systems. Some of the sociologists focus on the structural aspects of caste examining its nature and restrictions



on occupation and social interactions. Some other thinkers can be seen analyzing how caste operates as a system of social differentiation and power. Again, some perspectives throw light on the caste-based strata in the form of division of labour and social hierarchies. They consider it as a form of IKS particularly within the traditional societies and traditional caste groups.

Indian sociologist G. S. Ghurye view the caste as a unique social institution including different components like segmental division particularly the notions of pollution and purity. French sociologist and anthropologist Louis Dumont also view it as a hierarchical system based on purity and pollution. M. N. Shrinivas's work focuses on the aspect of Sanskritization and dominant caste where he specifically mentioned the hierarchy and ranking of the caste in terms of occupational differentiation, restrictions, principles of pollution as the attributes of Indian caste system. On the other hand, Michel Foucault also had proposed the concept of power and knowledge that is inseparable dice to the influential institutions exert control over any kind of information that marginalized groups are willing to get, but those groups remain underestimated. The knowledge systems also have been criticized at some point of time by some critical analyst of the same. One of these thinkers are Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, whose analysis on caste system to be shown as integral part of IKS provides a clear understanding of how Indian Knowledge has been marginalized. The influential remark of the critical thoughts of social reformist Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Dr. Ambedkar had critical point of view on caste system. As Phule was deeply troubled by this oppressive system that perpetuated discrimination and untouchability within the castes Dr. Ambedkar contributed to the empowerment of marginalized groups along with the elimination of caste-based discrimination that were not opposed by the IKS.(Sethi 2024, p.66,68)

Influenced by Phule, Dr. Ambedkar highlighted how the system denied dignity, education, and economic advancement to the artisan caste and empowered them and lower castes to dismantle the caste system and its inequalities associated with it. According to him, this system is based on the dogma of pre-destination, where no caste including artisan castes has any right to change their social and occupational position at any point of time. Ultimately it means that castes do not permit readjustment of occupation i.e. a sutar will always be a sutar, a kumbhar be always in his position, a lohar will only be a lohar in their self and so on Here caste becomes a direct cause of unemployment among them (Aglave,2017).

IKS today, can be argumentative in such a way that it has been somewhere reluctant in accepting the technology-driven era. Even today, no proper documentation of the knowledge texts has been found and it also lacks the standardization or validation of texts responsible for their non-acceptance. Scientific rigor and gaps in the evidence is again one of the important reasons behind the same as today IKS practices are lacking empirical validation. So, it may result into promoting superstitions if not examined critically and hence critics argue the intentions of such knowledge systems. This leads to the further division in urban-rural communities that the popularity of IKS is often seen in rural and traditional groups and urban populations are heading more towards Western models. Artisans are majorly facing this issue today where modern trends are overpowering their manual and traditional efforts. It can be seen a major differentiation and argumental issues on the global and domestic perception on IKS. It is again a question as of how much relevant the ancient systems are in this techno-driven world to which the answer is very sceptical. (AVKS academy,2025)

### **Globalization (Glocalization) and Traditional Jajmani System**

Globalization theory examines that it is a process of increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of nations through the spread of ideas, information, goods, services and capital across borders. Now, as IKS is interrelated with caste system, it becomes important to know as of what has kept it relevant since a very long time. Traditionally, the Indian social structure of caste system is often known as 'Jajmani System'. Jajmani system is known for traditional caste and barter-based relationships that was deeply impacted by globalization. The demand for local artisans has been eroded as the expansion and promotion of cash-based transactions, market economies and industrialization. While globalization has weakened the economic viability of the Jajmani system for both patrons and clients, the individual artisans have been encouraged to leave this traditional caste-based village structure. This traditional Jajmani system is strongly interrelated to the caste-based norms and values that were never challenged or objected by IKS. So, globalization has played a vital role in undermining the Jajmani system and hence offering new economic opportunities and shift away from



the hereditary roles defined by caste system.

The process of globalization and modernization is immensely responsible for the shifting of traditional barter-jajmani to cash economy that led to weakening of exchange of services for grains. The economic and social interdependence inherent in the jajmani system became less necessary as individual could goods and services from wider more impersonal market.

### **Impact of IKS on Traditional Jajmani System**

So, when we integrate jajmani system with the Indian Caste system, it deliberately shows that how these systems and stratifications are influenced by one-another. Primarily the division of labour plays an eminent role in the formation of the caste system and so is for IKS. In many rural parts of India, thousands of villages are having certain unique division of labour forming certain occupational or service groups. These occupational groups function through their communication system and survive in the enclosed barriers such as clan exogamy, caste endogamy, internal stratification, various forms of taboos, customs and beliefs are integrated and embedded parts of traditional caste system, a significant part of IKS.

However, IKS has also somewhere negatively impacts on jajmani system. It is responsible for the decline in the jajmani system/or the former is responsible for the decline of jajmani system, that has a very strict hereditary occupational practice. Jajmani system is kind of a system that distributes the land-owning families from higher caste are provided service and products by various lower castes such as carpenters (sutar), barbers (nai), potters (kumbhar), blacksmiths (lohar), washerman (dhobi), sweepers (chuhra) etc. One can find the complementary relationship between the groups of dominant peasant castes on one side and service or artisans' caste on the other. This is system where service and artisan castes rendered services to land owning peasant castes and to the higher dominant castes. The artisan castes in the jajmani system are entitled traditionally fixed shares of their produce or some sort of small lands in return. In order to maintain the notions of purity and impurity and the relative rank within the caste system, the jajmani system has ideologically connected and contributed to the norms that are justified through religion. IKS, for instance has not ignored or neglected this ideology and hence it can be observed that the declination of the jajmani system has taken a long period of time in northern parts of India. (Dhall M)

### **Decline of Balutedari System and its Impact on Craftsmen**

Balutedari system, similar to Jajmani system is popular in state of Maharashtra and so both the systems are regionally equivalent to one another. As mentioned earlier that patrons are jajmanis and clients are 'kamins' in the jajmani system, here Balutedars are hereditary service provides as kamins.

The decline of these systems is significantly begun from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards due to introduction of cash economy, British policies and industrialization. Before 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the system existed in the medieval period, it is observed that there was an emergence of a class of village servants, that coincide with the beginning of early settlements of farmers. This settlement developed during the middle age period when the jobless artisans found the solution to problem of their unemployment by migrating to rural from urban areas to seek their livelihood. So, due to expansion of villages with growing requirements of those developing villages, farmers do not find much difficult to give services to artisans such as they needed carpenters, black-smiths, potter and astrologers to carry out their routine agricultural operations. In order to prevent their frequent migrations for livelihoods, the artisans were assured by the village communities for giving them a definite annual income. The agricultural production to the farmers and its pay was equivalent and proportional to their services, so here the artisans, the craftsmen became village servants and led to the formation of a significant elements of social organization in medieval period or before 17<sup>th</sup> century in India. Thus, the impact of the decline of the Balutedari system after the medieval period was huge on the craftsmen or the artisans in Maharashtra. It can be an argumental debate on the ideology of Indian, perhaps Indigenous Knowledge System. IKS stands where the traditional knowledge has to give shape to a society that sustains the norms and values of the stratified caste system. One can observe the decline in the skilled artisans as the Balutedari system began to decline after the traditional era of Middle Ages. The system where the skilled artisans provided services in exchange of the agricultural produce weakened gradually due to the machine-made goods and a drastic growth in industrialization. Thus, the demand of traditional crafts, skilled artisans resulted to the decline of the Balutedari system that made a shift to the economic and social changes in the structure of societies altogether. The artisans experienced a

significant decline in their income and livelihood security due to the economic hardship. The reduced demands of their hand-made products or handicrafts resulted in their economic and social loss. The social status of the artisans impacted after their declination of a long-survived system, because previously as we got to see, the artisans were integral to the village communities. Some of the artisans from the rural parts of Maharashtra started producing for the urban market also, by the mid of 18<sup>th</sup> century. So, the craftsmen or artisans' castes lost control over the quality and quantity along with certain duration of production. The individual castes groups are traditionally producing handicrafts all over India and particularly the 12 Balutedars in Maharashtra. The astrologers, the priest, weavers, leather workers, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, carpenter, blacksmiths, cobbler, fishermen, rope-maker, and mahar are such endogamous caste groups which has their definite place in caste hierarchy. So, the declined nature of the Balutedari system had somewhere made a path for innovation and intermixture of machines and artisans, but on the other hand the old traditions are keeping the system alive by the defined positions of the artisans and marking the boundaries within the caste system again (Commodification of Handicrafts, 2017, Unit 21).

### **Present condition of traditional craftsmen caste (artisans)**

The artisans and their traditional art and skills are being perpetuated in the history of traditional knowledge systems. Craftsmanship has been culturally and traditionally a core survival of the artisan castes, where the knowledge systems have kept them on the bottom positions as defined by Indian caste system. On one side, IKS promotes the skilled artisans that could be working for the upper castes, it becomes essential to understand the present conditions of those traditional artisans on the other. IKS can be challenged in terms of unemployability of those craftsmen castes or artisans in the current scenario. There are several key challenges that are being faced by the artisan's castes that cannot be ignored or neglected, not even by knowledge systems. Financial insecurity, low income, lack of capital, limited market access, growing competition, erosion of traditional skills, lack of digital knowledge, institutional gaps, and disorganization are the challenging factors responsible for their joblessness. The craftsmen caste and their crafts have now been observed as it in somewhere lacking the demand of those crafts in the contemporary markets, especially after the arrival of globalization. IKS gave importance to the traditional art but today those traditional handicrafts and products are considered only old fashioned and antithetical to modern tastes. The cultural identity of the craftsmanship has been blurred with time and so it resulted into a mere decorative part of any handmade product. Today, the traditional craftsmanship stands where it is considered as inferior to any other modern product. Presently, the government is also treating this industry as if it has been set down and that has occurred during lack of well-developed policies and programs to guard and make the ecosystem of craftsmen or artisans strong. (Vats 2020, p.62,63)

In Maharashtra, the variety of artforms in handicrafts can be observed even today, but the craftsmanship needs to get much more attention as it is getting presently. An example of weavers in Maharashtra can be taken to understand the value of traditional craft that has been faded due to the modern challenges given to the craftsmen community. The Muslim community of artisans are believed to be migrated in the region to keep the rich heritage legacy alive and IKS can play a crucial role in preserving the culture but modern weaving techniques are somewhere overpowering the traditional way of crafting that cannot be denied by knowledge systems. The motive of IKS will always be preserving the traditional craftsmanship but the current requirements of artisans such as implementation of modern educational skills and providing continuous training needs to be fulfilled so that it can help them to significantly cope up with the present scenario. In order to improve the condition of artisans in today's world, it becomes absolutely essential for knowledge systems to initiate certain policies and protective measures with the government support that could ensure and safeguard the livelihood of artisans and ultimately to increase the lifespan of craftsmanship all together.

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