



Unravelling the Threads of Ultra-Poverty: A Closer Look at Applique Artisans in Village Ghoradia, Orissa

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Abstract: *The article is based on the poverty situation of village Ghoradia in Puri district, Orissa. We have narrated here the ultra-poverty situations based on a visit to the village. This is mostly based on primary data. They are inflicted by a number of specific issues like health, food security and agriculture, education, human rights etc. The women folk of this village work on applique. In fact, applique craft is famous in the entire district with Pipili as its hub. The Pipili is a small town for applique related business. This small town is situated about 40 kilometers from Puri, Orissa (Odisha). The income of the people of this town is essentially dependent on the business of its handicrafts. Pipili has an entry in 2004 in the Guinness Book of Records, for the world's largest thematic applique work. A 54 metre long work filled with depictions of India's struggle for independence is a marvelous piece of craftsmanship was made here.*

Many of the artisans in these places are in ultra-poverty, deprived for ages; the villagers depend on agriculture as their main source of income, mostly marginal farmers. In the present global scenario, the important most human endeavour should be to work for sustainable solutions that stitch extreme poverty and build shared prosperity for humanity on the planet. Role of traditional artisans in the rural economy is significant, yet most of them are poor, sometimes afflicted by ultra-poverty. They are poor but they are large in numbers and occupy a major concern towards inclusive development. Their situation needs ameliorated else, with utmost priority.

Introduction:

The village Ghoradia in Puri district, Orissa has more than 1500 families. For ages most of these families, majority of them are from the Dalit community have been trapped by ultra-poverty. In July, 2023 I had an opportunity to visit the village in connection with a project of the Foundation for MSME Clusters, New Delhi. A meeting with the artisans of the village was pre-planned, yet we could not find any spacious room in any of their

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houses where we could conduct this meeting. It was a cramped room where we finally settled, we wanted to discuss with wider cross-section of the artisans, but for these limitations, we had interaction with just 15 applique women artisans on the mud floor as the last option. I had been eager to understand the socio-economic dynamics, absorb the stories that moulded their lives, I was restless to know their stories from their mouths, not from elsewhere.

Applique is also known as Chandua. The word applique comes from the French word *appliquer*, meaning “to put on”. There are two variants to this technique, applique, where a fabric shape is sewn over a base layer, and reverse applique, wherein two layers of fabric are laid down, and a shape is subsequently cut out from the upper layer, exposing the lower layer, before both are stitched together. It is one of the products which have been granted Geographical Indication by the Government of India.

Objectives:

1. To assess the status of the poverty with which the applique artisans are afflicted with in Orissa’s Puri district;
2. To bring a sense of awareness about their situation in the public domain;
3. To draw the attention of the policy makers and of the social impact leaders to initiate enabling step toward the reduction of ultra-poverty and
4. To raise the appreciation level about the amazing crafts that the artisans create while struggling with poverty.

Methodology:

Social science research is an enquiry or investigation with clearly defined parameters. The study is based mostly on primary data. Some of the information are collected from various authenticate publications pertaining to core indicators and the data was cross-verified wherever possible between various statistics.

Result & Discussion:

For developing this article and capturing data from the universe of study we received support of a few field staff of Foundation for MSME Clusters and the local NGO. Ajit Nayak, MBA, working in the Foundation for MSME Clusters as the State Head, who organised this visit told me the reality of the poor infrastructures and more importantly I could see it with my eyes. How people live in social harmony fighting every day the abject poverty that shackled their lives, is a true story that I could read from the dumb



mouths and gloomy faces of the village artisans there. There was probably no sizeable room where we can seat to conduct an interactive meet with the artisans of the village that was very important driving me to undertake the tour.

During our journey to the destination village, we made a stop at the office of the Dalit Vikas Samity, Nuagowm Sakhigopal, a local NGO that works for the welfare of artisans. There, we were graciously served with refreshing coconut water, a testament to the abundance of coconut production in the entire locality, which serves as a source of income for the community. We learned about the potential for setting up coir-based MSME clusters to fully utilize the coconuts, but unfortunately, only two such clusters are currently operational in the area, and their efficiency is not optimal.

We reached village Ghoradia at the end of around three hours' drive. The women folk of this village work on applique. In fact, applique craft is famous in the entire district with Pipili as its hub. The Pipili is no more a village, gradually growing to a commercial destination, a small town for applique related business. This small town is situated about 40 kilometers from Puri, Orissa (Odisha). The income of the people of this town is essentially dependent on the business of its handicrafts of which the applique works are the main source. Nowadays, Pipili is globally known as the destination of applique and is where many workers and workshops continue to practice the technique, creating both traditional and contemporary items. Pipili has an entry in 2004 in the Guinness Book of Records, for the world's largest thematic applique work. A 54 metre long work filled with depictions of India's struggle for independence is a marvelous piece of craftsmanship was made here.

Pipili applique work owes its origin to the culture of Lord Jagannath during the 12th century. Earlier applique umbrellas and canopies were prepared by the Gajapatis for the annual Ratha Yatra of Lord Jagannath. Nowadays its usage is more in household, decorative and festival products. The applique items are mainly used during rituals and Yatra of the deities, particularly the colourful applique cloth covers of the three rathas of the deities during Ratha Yatra. Apart from differences in colour the basic design of all three is similar. Applique work is also used in making pillows, seats and ritual dresses for the deities. The base cloth includes water proof material for umbrellas, velvet for tents, cotton, threads etc. The craft involves embroidering and stitching. For attaching the pieces of cloth the makers use straight stitch, satin stitch, blind stitch, or buttonhole stitch. Sometimes they also make mirror work and many decorative stitches. Mythical and natural figures are used for the work like ducks, peacocks, parrots, trees, elephants, creepers, flowers the sun, half-moon etc. India is a vast country with innumerable rituals, festivals and religious discourses, applique or Chandua are commonly used, opening up a wide market for it.



Ms Bidyutprava Bal accompanied us to our trip to the village Ghoradia. Ms Bal did her B. Tech in Textile Technology from College of Engineering and Technology, Bhubaneswar in 2018. She hails from Puri; her husband is a Mechanical engineer working with Jindal Steel Pvt Ltd. The couple has a son in kindergarten. For the sake of services the couple live at different places. In our hours of drive to the village Ms Bal shared stories that are close to the lives of applique artisans here. She is going to be the Textile trainer for the Project of Foundation for MSME Clusters, New Delhi, sponsored by CISCO, titled Empowering Rural Women Enterprises through Digital Technology, a digitalisation focused intervention among Textile based Women Household Artisanal Clusters.

Negotiating through the narrow, poor, forlorn - who cares to maintain this stretch of road, we reached the village Ghoradia. Monalisa Ghoudia, in wild joy and great sense of duty were running ahead of our vehicle to escort us in right direction leading to the mud clad poor house where the applique artisans of the village were awaiting our way. They looked with visible hesitations in their faces, where do we sit?. We spontaneously sat down on the mud floor in one of the India's poorest villages, like many others, to keep them at ease, I kept on watching the faces of the crew of elderly women, some were inside and some were piercing their heads through narrow window to understand what the next course is. We appealed as many as can be pushed inside the room, may sit down on floor for impactful interactions. After listening to a few of them, they spoke in broken Hindi Oriya mix, I could realise that each of them has their stories to share, for me worth writing and telling the people all around. I could listen to their feeble voices, while absorbing the scorching heat, they murmur, we are poor but many, we have numerous issues for ages to be asked, to be solved in transforming our lives to worthy human being. I spoke to Reshma Routray, a 14 year old girl who passed class x this year, secured 50% marks. This is the highest score among the peer group in the village. She wants to continue her studies but there are uncertainties looming over her dream, due to the extreme poverty, her mother can't provide support. Mother standing at the side nodded in sorrow. Reshma is youngest from a poor marginal farmer's family of three other siblings, she wants to manifest, break the shackles of limits.

Baishaki Dhudia, a 21 year old girl who passed class xii, narrated her story of consistent struggles. She had to take care of her widow mother, two sisters and a brother. She earns Rs. 2000 a month from tuition teaching students of class v to x standard in the village. But this is only seasonal earning source not round the year. Their other income is applique work, her mother earns just Rs. 400 pm. Baishaki has been doing this for last two years while her mother has been doing this for last 18 years. Her brother has taken a menial job recently in a private undertaking while other sisters struggling to farther their studies. Monalisa, the youngest sister of Baishaki standing aside in gloom of



sadness, in one of the brightest days with thermometer reads at 40 degree Celsius, nodded the storytelling of the family whose father died out of abject poverty, as if she wants to add many more substances to the story. Their mother earns Rs.10 a day from applique work, one could hardly believe but they confirmed about this. Out of 40,750 villages in North East Region, India I have reached out nearly to 3,000 villages with Government of India's poverty alleviation and employment generation programme in last five years, but have not found the state of comparable abject poverty anywhere that I found in Ghoradia. The houses they build are virtually with no in between gaps, thatched, dilapidated with lack of hygiene. They are living there, in those houses. The village women are at Applique work as no livelihood option left to them, their life intricacies are similar to the applique crafts they creates. Another story of human scuffle would have remained unknown to me if I had not spoken to them or visited Ghoradia.

They offered Pepsi cold drink, bought specially for a special guest, I affectionately hinted my hesitation for Pepsi coco-cola, instead wanted a glass of homemade *nimbu pani*. This helped in sinking their hesitation; I am welcomed with more warmth and acceptance. In my career as rural development professional, for more than three decades, I always realised that unless you are being accepted, you are being trusted, and you can't work with them. Returning to hotel, Crystal Urban Park, Bhubaneswar, late night I wrote a brief Facebook post on July 3, 2023 promising to develop a story soon on them as gesture of my gratitude and upload in my New Blog "Village-next".

In the village I visited Umakanta Nayak (58 Years), a hard working artisan. In his two sets of very old power loom he and his wife make Sambalpuri design rumal (handkerchief) and Khorda gamucha. To him sells are not difficult in marginal profits.

Next day morning we left for another village Dhanakera. Dhanakera panchayat has more than 700 women artisans engaged in applique work. In the village a MSME Applique Cluster has been setup, it started functioning in the year 2020 but found not operational optimally. The cluster is 50 km from Bhubaneswar and 35 km from Puri. We were accompanied by Dr. Sarmistha Mohanty, Secretary of a Bhubaneswar based NGO named Janasadhana. She has been working in the social sector for last 20 years. She said, they work with village women, especially artisans, weavers, farmers, SC and ST women in health sector and livelihood promotions. Dr. Mohanty got her PhD in History, she had been teaching at Culture University, Odisha for 10 years before shifting to the NGO's works to support her husband. She worked as a Guest Faculty at IIT, Roorkee. She also did her Masters in Odissi vocal. For the CISCO project of the Foundation for MSME Clusters she will be a textile designer to impart training.

I had the opportunity to converse with some of the skilled artisans in the area. Sushana Souren and Bishnupriya Routray shared that they have been honing their applique craft



for the past 20 years. Bishnupriya (55 years) began her journey in applique work after her marriage two decades ago, along with her husband. She candidly spoke about the challenges she faced in learning this traditional craft, as she did not come from a family with a background in applique. To acquire the necessary skills, she diligently travelled every day from Dhanakera to Pipili, covering a distance of 30 km, for training. Over time, her hard work has paid off, and her business has flourished, not just in Dhanakera panchayat but across the entire region. Bishnupriya now sells her products in the competitive Pipili market.

Sushana Sarain has also been passionately practicing applique for the past 20 years. In addition to her, Laxmipriya Pradhan and Mina Rani Souren engage in stitching Saya (petticoat) orders from outside, earning Rs. 20 for each hour of stitching work. We had the opportunity to visit Bishnupriya Routray's workshop in Nolibasanta village, located 27 km from Pipili, where she proudly mentioned that she has 150 artisans working under her from villages like Nolibasanta, Sakhigopal, and Satyabodi. Her family has been involved in this craft for over 30 years and has achieved considerable success. While Bishnupriya claimed that all the artisans working with her earn Rs. 4000 per month, there seemed to be some unspoken issues that were hesitantly left undisclosed.

Major findings:

The women folk of village Ghoradia work on applique and the applique craft are famous in the entire district with Pipili as its hub. The income of the people of Pipili depends on the business of applique. Pipili is globally known as the destination of applique. The applique items are mainly used during rituals and Ratha Yatra of the deities (a journey in a chariot accompanied by the public). Apart from differences in colour the basic design of all three is similar. Applique work is also used in making pillows, seats and ritual dresses for the deities. Mythical and natural figures are used for the work. India is a place of rituals, festivals and religious discourses, applique are commonly used, opening up a wide market for it.

Many of the artisans of Dhanakera panchayat are in ultra-poverty, deprived for ages, the villagers depend on agriculture as their main source of income, mostly marginal farmers. To add to their difficulties, most of their agricultural lands are flood affected, the poor farmers say, there is no mechanism to dispose-off the rain water, of this water-logged areas, as a result of recurrent floods, they have been suffering for long. By the country sides there I could see many people of working age are just gossiping or sitting idle. Under the pressing situations applique works are the livelihood for the women folk, it is hardly men's job. Yet, applique items are slow moving items, hardly fetches any remunerative value. The women whom I interacted said the produces in the



ISSN (Print Version) 0975-3931
ISSN (On Line Version) 2278-1277

applique cluster are damped for dearth of market since 2020, this blocked their working capital; render the women artisans out of job.

Conclusions:

Many of the artisans in these places are in ultra-poverty, deprived for ages; the villagers depend on agriculture as their main source of income, mostly marginal farmers. In the present global scenario, the important most human endeavour should be to work for sustainable solutions that stitch extreme poverty and build shared prosperity for humanity on the planet. Role of traditional artisans in the rural economy is significant, yet most of them are poor, sometimes afflicted by ultra-poverty. They are poor but they are large in numbers and occupy a major concern towards inclusive development. Their situation needs ameliorated else, with utmost priority.

What is needed is immediate intervention in terms of design inputs, creating e-commerce platform, finding new markets and educating them on UPI mode of business transactions. The present project of Foundation for MSME Clusters aims to address the gamut of these issues.

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The photographs are clicked on 3rd and 4th July, 2023 at the spot in the villages during the period of research / investigation. While some of the photographs shows the author engage in interactions, taking meeting with the local artisan community, with NGO leaders the others show their crafts the applique made in the respective villages.

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ISSN (Print Version) 0975-3931
ISSN (On Line Version) 2278-1277

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