

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE FOR PRESENTATION OF SHILP GURU AWARDS AND NATIONAL AWARDS TO MASTER CRAFT PERSONS FOR 2015

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1. I am happy to be amongst you on the occasion of conferring the Shilp Guru and National Awards to outstanding master craft persons for the year 2015. At the outset, let me congratulate those who have been bestowed with these prestigious awards today. I express my deep appreciation for their outstanding contribution to the preservation and promotion of Indian handicraft traditions and enrichment of our cultural heritage. These awardees will inspire and encourage young craft persons of India to strive for excellence in their chosen fields. My felicitations to you – and through you – to all the members of the handicrafts community of our nation!

Ladies and Gentlemen:

2. Our indigenous handicrafts are a cherished aspect of the Indian way of life. Their extensive range reflects our nation's diversity and infinite creativity. Each region of our vast nation has its unique style and own tradition. These elements stem from the ancient life-rhythms of the society. Our *shilpkar*s have, over the centuries, developed their own methods and techniques to bring life into stone and metal, sandalwood and clay, and cotton and silk. In the past, the *shilpkars* had perfected scientific and engineering processes that were more advanced than other civilizations. Their creations reveal their admirable skills, sophisticated knowledge and distinctive aesthetic sense.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

3. The relevance of handicrafts goes much beyond the link it has with our history and civilization. Craftsmanship has sustained over centuries through generations. It has provided livelihood and stimulated socio-economic and cultural development at the grassroots level of our society. It has contributed substantially to the empowerment of women, youth and the disabled. Women constitute over 50 percent of the workforce in the handicrafts sector. A sizeable percentage of artisans also belong to the scheduled castes and tribes, and religious minorities.

4. Handicrafts provide good income opportunities to rural households at low investments. They also supplement rural income in the agricultural off-season. Vitality in this sector is important. It checks migration of work forces and keeps traditional economic relationships intact. With our agricultural sector already burdened, and employment opportunity in capital-intensive industries extremely limited, the role of handicrafts in generating employment and income opportunities has become crucial. This sector provides employment to about 70 lakh persons. The scope for gainfully absorbing more people exists in the system. We must make concerted effort to achieve this objective.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

5. Handicrafts enjoy a wide production base. Yet, the sector faces numerous challenges. It suffers from inadequate availability of raw material, out-dated technology and limited access to markets. The products in this sector remain vulnerable to the stiff competition from cheaper imports and machine-made substitutes. These are the issues that need to be addressed systematically and comprehensively.

6. Emphasis at the policy and implementation levels has to be on the availability of sound infrastructure for the craft persons. Focused attention has to be paid to the quality of handicraft products. In this regard, it is my firm belief that we can construct linkages between universities, corporate houses and government bodies working in this area particularly to build an R&D ecosystem for building new technology. This would help a traditional sector like handicrafts to upgrade its equipment and processes to produce world-class products at competitive prices. Full-fledged R&D systems would also take care of design aspects in handicrafts.

7. Good quality product has an international reach. The growth in handicraft exports at 16 percent in 2015-16 is an indication of the importance this sector is assuming in our export basket. Having said that, proactive steps are needed to realize the full potential of this sector. Promotion of products in both domestic and international markets would expand its geographic reach, achieve economies of scale and make production more viable. Policy support will be necessary to evolve profitable market linkages and ensure easier access to bank credit. I compliment the Ministry of Textiles for launching the scheme of 'Pehchan' identity cards for artisans recently. This new upgraded ID card system, by linking artisans with their Aadhaar numbers and bank accounts, will enable them to receive direct cash transfer and other benefits. To my mind, this innovative scheme will provide fillip to the promotion of arts and crafts in the Indian and overseas markets.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

8. Greater attention is also needed for capacity building and skills recharge. "*Guru Shishya Parampara*" has been an important aspect of our traditional arts and crafts. Master-craftsmen, down the ages, have taken pride in passing on their skills to their succeeding generations. Once Gandhiji observed about handicrafts and I quote: "*If we want to keep all seven lakhs of our villages alive and not only a fraction of them, we have to revive our village handicrafts. And you may be sure that if we impart scholastic training through those crafts, we can bring about a revolution*" (unquote). The long tradition of knowledge transfer in handicrafts must continue. In addition, our education system would do well to pursue a holistic course curriculum for imparting skills in fine arts. It will help identify hidden talent and ingenuity in many a student.

9. When I think of creativity in any form, I am reminded of the rich contribution that the craft persons have made in developing masterpieces of handicrafts. An old art form like crafts displays wide variety. Yet, there is always an element of novelty to be tried. By recognizing craft persons through conferment of the awards today, we are encouraging innovation and creativity in this field. I applaud the efforts of the Ministry of Textiles to promote, through these important awards, the creation of master pieces of art and make India a hub of master craft persons.

10.I, once again, compliment the craft persons who have been awarded today. I offer you my best wishes for your creative work in the years to come and all success in your future endeavours.

Thank You.

Jai Hind.