GLOBALIZING RURAL MARKETS: EVIDENCE FROM HANDMADE TRADITIONAL PRODUCT MARKETS

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ABSTRACT

Learning market realities improves businesses. Kerala, India, traditional cottage units producing indigenous handmade goods are not an exception. Changes because of globalization have intensified competition to imported non-natural factory products into Kerala markets. Traditional industries, ignorant of these penetrations, struggle hard to challenge their urban competitors. Response delays may push these units out, replacing them with imported products. This study carries a market threat analysis to appraise current market realities for traditional products of Kerala. The first part of the study involves a competitor analysis with a survey focusing on 200 artisans selected from three districts. We focus on five market key causes. The primary survey focused on a sample of 200 artisans randomly selected from voluntary traditional craft units of three districts. Competitive profiles developed in this paper assessed the market realities and global challenges for handmade products. The second part of the analysis, studies the types of threat that could wreak havoc the future of handmade traditional products.

JEL: M20, M30, M31

KEYWORDS: Market Threat, Global & Rural Markets, Traditional Products, Kerala

INTRODUCTION

The marketplace isn't what it used to be. In the recent past, globalization has brought great changes across the world. The key characteristic of today's global market is the speed with which the demand for a product and change in its style, design, and colour, offer greater opportunities as well as threats to producers. Perhaps, improved technology with advanced infrastructure, to a greater extent promotes hastened movement of goods without trade barriers. The growing commercialization of Kerala's traditional handicraft products is a sign of inevitable movement of cottage industries to keep them refreshed with changing markets. The precarious nature of handmade craft markets invites strategic approaches to reach global consumers. But, delayed response can push these deep-rooted traditional handmade products out, replacing them with mass, factory–made, machine crafts.

Kerala a land of rich cultural heritage presents colourful traditional handmade products handed down from generations. Regional products, especially craftworks, involve large and diversified designs in wood, metals, glass, stone, clay and other materials. Although large industries did not make inroads in rural Kerala, the inspiration is to preserve village traditions and encourage artisans to organize themselves into small craft units under cooperative line.

Often, the scarcity and distinctive nature of materials needed for production compel artisans to move their units into interior regions, close to forests, in search of good quality raw materials at low cost. Perhaps, for this reason, until recently, most traditional handmade products of the State lack accessibility to urban pockets.

In recent years, the notion to expand rural tourism with a significant move to promote rural crafts by the government invited attention of private traders to this industry. The industry joined with government sponsored crafts centres and the State Tourism Campaign. Private traders welcomed the move and established factory-made production and marketing units in villages. The growing global publicity for traditional products encouraged private traders to set up business in rural tourist pockets. Enjoying a better share of Kerala markets, private merchants revolutionized the handmade product industry with fake, low priced crafts.

Experts agree that the rush of imported crafts had an impact on production and marketing of handmade traditional products in rural Kerala. Unaware of the current market realities, a majority of cooperative artisanal units struggled to place their products with the conventional methods of marketing. This paper explores current market realities for traditional products of Kerala. Selecting, rural artisanal units functioning under cooperative principles as an example, this study appraises the extent of competitive threat faced by the handmade traditional products of the State.

The remainder of the paper explores the aforesaid challenges. Focusing on past research on related issues in promoting hand-made crafts the literature review explores the market scenario of traditional hand-made products of India as well as Kerala. Explaining the data and methodology, following sections explain the results and summary of study with suggestions for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In early periods, artisans selected local markets as their outlets to sell indigenous traditional products. However, with expanding tourism, the trend to globalize rural craft markets offered a wide opening to several traditional ethnic products across the world (Margaret, 1990). In addition, the rising income and consequent change in lifestyles brought demand for handmade home accessories and décor crafts (Ted and Marina, 2006). However, in the age of globalization, a study by the author (2010) on applying quantitative marketing in handicraft industry recommends artisans not to limit their designs to a fixed range, but to diversify products to push themselves ahead of their competitors.

Today's markets witness radical changes because of technological shifts in consumers buying behavior (Kotler, *et. al*, 2009). For instance, the information age with fast market communication ease producers' link with business partners, customers and government regulators. Eventually, things designed manually become computerized (Osmond, 2010), exposing even regional products to global consumers. The indigenous traditional products are not an exception, because e-promotions offer wide exposure to the diverse culture and traditions of a number of countries to global consumers.

The growing markets for decorative crafts intensified competition between handmade and factory-made crafts in Kerala. But sometimes, in contrast to the market observations, some products, because of the aesthetic designs are unable to be copied by machines. These products fetch a good share in global markets (Rajagopal, 1989). Even if, globalization encourages cottage industries to thrive rather than wither with their aesthetic beauty (Vanaja, 2010), it brings a market threat because of free trade, mass factory production or import of low priced crafts (Thomas *et.al*, 2003). To add to, Pradeep (2008) discovers that in a majority of rural crafts deregulation and privatization eventually out priced the hard labor of artisans.

If one asked the cottage industries to identify the greatest challenges faced by them, one of the commonest responses would be competition (Norman, et. al, 2009). What causes, indeed drives the increased competition may vary from smarter rivals to large factory units competing at a low price (Executive Outlook, 2006). Therefore, when consumers receive same products with less differentiation but at low price, rural artisans face competitive pressure in same market (Norman, et. al, 2009). Also, the emergence of several e-retailers, similar to Amazon.com, bypasses existing rural retailers, facilitating buyers to place orders online at lower prices. This new distribution strategy has enormously expanded the market horizon, welcoming crafts of different regions into Kerala markets (New Kerala, 2009).

Because of the market developments reflected on a global scale, majority of village artisans have lost their hold over the old 'patron-client' market network (Manoj, 1994). In some parts of rural India, regional markets remained untapped with an impression that handmade goods are high priced and poorly designed (Layila, 1994 and Nerys.et.al, 2006). An early study by Uma (1965) discovers wide disparities in market opportunities between urban and rural products and complaints on the inability of village crafts to penetrate external markets competing with machine made urban crafts. Keplan's (1977) study on relative significance of strategic marketing to promote cottage industries corroborates Uma's findings.

Much has been discussed about the prevailing economic conditions of traditional industries of various states (Manzoor 1992; Thambi 1975 and Thaimani, 1987). A study by Nurkse (1954) warns of a threat of a vicious circle of undevelopment in this sector. With low productivity, low income and low investment, this vicious circle gradually leads to market failure. To support the above argument Dak (1989) lists reasons that cause market failure to handmade products. He claims poor designs, low product quality and inefficient market approaches are the major weaknesses of rural artisans. These weaknesses exploited by urban based factories, with low costs keep village crafts from global markets (Digbey, 1960; Sanjay, 1988 and Luckose (1992). In response to these issues, emerging literature addressing the limitations of rural enterprises recommends viable solutions to above market issues (Gundiff, 1972; Manzoor 1992; Thambi, 1975 and Ram, 1988).

Thaimani (1987), admits that a lack of market awareness is the main obstacle pulling village products from global markets. Some researchers recommend periodic market research to design workable solutions to gain competitive advantage (Prajapati, 1986; Layila, 1994; George, 2009 and Vanaja, 2010). A strategic market study by Aron (2003) also supports these issues, recommending innovation-based strategies to assess market threats. In brief, artisans should have an understanding of market dynamics including variations in channel policies and pricing techniques to develop a comprehensive plan to meet tailor-made demands (Kashyap and Raut, 2006). When multinational companies refilled rural Kerala with hi-tech marketing (Artncraft, 2010), apparent change in consumer buying trends and the entry of various aggressively promoted factory products result. In light of this artisans must appraise their own market policies.

Conceptualizing the significance of assessing market realities for these products, the aim of this study is to explore the challenges for indigenous traditional products through a competitive and threat analysis, selecting Kerala handicraft markets as a case example.

DATA AND METHOD

Realizing that artisans, despite their inherited craftsmanship, are constantly exploited by merchant capitalists and middlemen, this study tries to learn the types of marketing mix that threats handmade products. We group the entire ethnic traditional industries of the State into three segments: traditional handmade craft cooperative units, private merchants with factory-based products and government supported cluster units which concentrate in production of both indigenous as well as contemporary style of decorative products.

The first stage of the research carried a competitor analysis using primary data. We anticipating the key success factors that decide the competitive strength of a business are based on the 4*P*s: *(P1), convenient pricing (P2), Product awareness (P3), innovative distribution (P4)as well as customer service* (Norman, et. al, 2009). For this reason, the survey focused on these variables. Based on ownership patterns, the study grouped competitors into three types of units: indigenous traditional handicraft units (sample units) private factory-based production units and government supported cluster units. 200 craftsmen randomly selected from the traditional cooperative units framed the research sample. The primary survey was administered in three districts of Kerala with a questionnaire where respondents rated the market strategies of their own units and competitors on a ten point scale ranging from low (1) to high (10).

Next the study attached weights to each key success factors derived from the survey, reflecting their relative importance for Kerala crafts. Based on the survey results, we list the leading competitors for traditional cottage units, by rating the key success factors based on the mean of score gained on a four-scale; such as; $\bar{x} < 2$= major weakness (1), $\bar{x}$ 2 to 4 = minor weakness (2), $\bar{x}$ = 4 to 6 minor strength (3) and $\bar{x} > 6$ = major strength (4). This rating model for competitor profile is a matrix created by multiplying the weights assigned to each key factor by the rates gained by them. The result of the total weighted score for each competitor allowed us to identify challenges and weak strategies of sample units.

The result applied in a competitive profile matrix traced out the threats that could make a severe impact on Kerala rural crafts. In addition, selecting seven major sources of market risk (Greg, 2005), the primary survey with same sample obtained artisans responses to each risk that would have a major impact on their products. The severity of the impact of each threat was rated on a 1 to 10 scale, assigning points to the probabilities of occurrence (between 0 and 1) to each threat. Multiplying the severity of each threat by likelihood of its happening (maximum threat score=10), reveals the most severe threat on which artisans should focus attention. The questionnaire was governed in three districts of Kerala during the period March to April, 2011.

The results of the pilot survey, showed wide variation in the product designs introduced by the three groups of craft units. Hence a Product Concentration Index (Fred, 1992), was used to measure the extent of diversity in the product mix offered by these units. Applying equation (1), production details about five main crafts; such as wood and metal carved idols of medium sizes, cane baskets, papier-mâché´ crafts, and horn carvings were included in the data. The production details were collected from the unpublished records of 12 units, four each, conveniently selected from the three groups of units from the same districts.

$$\mathrm{PCI} = 100\sqrt{\sum_{r-1}^{n}\frac{(zr)^2}{z}} \qquad (1)$$

The equation shows that z = the production of total crafts from a unit and zr, r $(1,\ldots n1)$ = production of sample crafts under study in a given year. The maximum value of the index is 100 which occurs when the society concentrates production in one item of craft. Higher values indicate less design diversity.

RESULTS

Respondents' opinion on the key factors for successful marketing was recorded on a ten point scale. Table 1 presents the rating of three sets of producers on a five selected key success factors. Score value (S), mean ($\bar{x}$) standard deviation (SD) and rating (R) of key factors were reported. The descriptive statistics in Table 1 reveal that product quality was the major strength of sample units. However, lack of consumers' awareness, customer services and innovating strategies in distribution were the major market limitations for handmade products compared to their rivalries.

Table 1: Respondents Rating of Their Units' against Their Competitors' Key Success Factors

Key Success Factors	**Sample Units[1]**				**Competitors Group[2]**				**Competitors Group[3]**			
	S	$\bar{x}$	SD	R	S	$\bar{x}$	SD	R	S	$\bar{x}$	SD	R
P1: Product Quality	1693	8.46	1.68	4	751	3.75	2.02	2	1237	6.19	3.66	4
P2 Convenient Pricing	859	4.29	2.35	3	1248	6.24	3.64	4	985	4.92	2.63	3
P3:Innovate Distribution	578	2.89	1.74	2	1229	6.15	3.33	4	1110	5.55	2.91	3
P4: Product Awareness	312	1.56	1.58	1	848	4.24	2.43	3	909	4.54	2.66	3
Customer Services	664	3.32	1.75	2	951	4.75	2.59	3	852	4.26	2.46	3

This table shows the rating for five variables by the indigenous traditional handicraft units (1) against private factory-based production units (2) and government supported cluster units (3). With a rating scale; $\bar{x}$: < 2= major weakness (1), $\bar{x}$: 2 to 4 = minor weakness (2), $\bar{x}$: 4 to 6 minor strength (3) and $\bar{x}$ >6 = major strength (4) the study identifies the major strength as well as weakness of sample units compared to its rivalries.

Realizing the relative importance of each key success factor in promoting indigenous traditional products, the weights assigned to each one identified the strongest and weakest strategies in production and marketing of rural handmade products.

The weights were allotted according to the market importance assigned to each key factor by the artisans. According to the significance of each factor the weights possessed by the factors were as follows: P1 = 35 %; P2= 20 %, P3= 25 %, P4= 10 % and customer services= 10%. The weight multiplied with rates assigned in table two, gave the weighted score for each type of handicraft units. Table 2 presents the market realities for each traditional products and reports the key success factor for each group of competitors, assessing the scores they obtained.

Table 2: Competitive Profile Matrix of Kerala Traditional Craft Sector

Key Success Factors		**Sample Units[1]**			**Competitors Group[2]**			**Competitors Group[3]**		
	Weight		Weighted			Weighted			Weighted	
Column number	1	2	3	*4*	5	6	7	6	7	8
	W* (w/100)	R	Score *(W x R)*	*% to total in column 3*	R	Score *(W x R)*	*% to total in column 6*	R	Score *(W x R)*	*% to total in column 7*
P1: Product Quality	.35	4	1.40	50.0	2	0.70	22.5	4	1.40	41.8
P2: Convenient pricing	.20	3	0.60	21.4	4	0.80	25.8	3	0.60	17.9
P3: Innovative Distribution	.25	2	0.50	17.8	4	1.00	32.3	3	0.75	22.5
P4: Product Awareness	.10	1	0.10	3.6	3	0.30	9.7	3	0.30	8.9
Customer Services	.10	2	0.20	7.2	3	0.30	9.7	3	0.30	8.9
Total	1.00		2.80	100		3.10	100		3.35	100

*This table shows the weighted score for five variables by the indigenous traditional handicraft units (1) against their competitors grouped as private factory-based production units (2) and government supported cluster units (3). In this tables weights were indexed according to the importance of each key factor to promote products in the market (P1 = .35; P2=.20; P3=.25; P4=.10, and customer services= .10). (|*Source: suggested by artisans and officials of Handicraft Development Board).*

Every business faces threats (Norman, et. al, 2009). Traditional cottage industries should not ignore threats that have potential to destroy their very existence or sustainability. This paper applies the most productive approach to identify the threats and their severe impact on traditional units by measuring the highest probability of occurrence. The variables listed in Table 3 emerged reflective of the market reality analysis done in above paragraphs.

The threat analysis identified the major areas on which an enterprise should focus their attention. Table 3 reports high scores for a few threats that demand more attention. Six threats that stood out above seven in the threat rating scale warn the indigenous traditional cottage units of the need to accommodate current market changes in their production and marketing strategies. However, among the listed six threats, since product innovation (7.14) was found to be the major limitation with lack of diversity in design the most severe threat (7.92), the rationality of this finding was appraised by comparing the production concentration index of three units in Table 4.

Table 3: Major Threat Analysis

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Source	Specific Threat	Severity (1=Low; 10=High) Mean	Probability of Occurrence (0 to 1) Mean	Threat Rating (Severity x Probability) (Max=10)	Extent of threat to variables in cell 2 (averages)
1	Distribution	Channel reputation	7.1	0.7	4.97	
	Channel	Channel spread	6.9	0.9	6.21	4.12
		Paying channel cost	4.0	0.3	1.20	
2	Demographic	Shift in income	4.1	0.5	2.05	
	changes in	Multicultural buyers	7.8	0.9	7.02	4.34
	market	More female buyers	7.9	0.5	3.95	
3	Globalization	Import of low priced goods	8.2	0.9	7.38	5.93
		Global consumer	5.6	0.8	4.48	
4	Government	Liberalization of import	8.4	0.5	4.20	5.32
	regulations	Blanket approach in polices	9.2	0.7	6.44	
5	Product	Lack of diversity in product design	8.8	0.9	7.92	
	innovations	Speed in introducing new designs	6.8	0.9	6.12	7.14
		Imported unique festival designs	8.2	0.9	7.38	
6	Influence of	Private traders	9.4	0.8	7.52	4.04
	interest group	Stake holders	4.3	0.3	1.29	
7	Changes in	Production easiness	7.6	0.9	6.84	
	Technology	Market propinquity	8.0	0.9	7.20	5.68
		Global promotions	5.0	0.6	3.00	

This table shows seven areas of market threats to the indigenous traditional handicraft units (1) against their competitors grouped as private factory-based production units (2) and government supported cluster units (3). The figures in cell 4 and 5 are the mean of the score of respondents' opinion. Figure in cell 6 reveals the market reality in terms of the threat measured multiplying cells 4 & 5.

Table 4: Product Concentration Index for Selected Five Products (Value in US $, in thousands)

	Rural Indigenous Traditional Handicraft (Value In US $, in Thousands)						**Private Factory-Based Production Units (Value In US $, in Thousands)**						**Government Supported Cluster Units (Value In US $, in Thousands)**					
	Wood & Metal	Cane	Paper	Horn	Other crafts	PCI	Wood & Metal	Cane	Paper	Horn	Other crafts	PCI	Wood & Metal	Cane	Paper	Horn	Other crafts	PCI
2007	22.70	1.6	1.49	2.1	4.8	69	18.7	8.3	8.5	11.6	11.3	32	22.6	9.5	6.1	10.2	8.9	0.39
2008	30.30	1.4	2.11	1.1	5.01	76	16.5 5	7.6	8.4	10.5	11.5	30	22.1	11.8	6.5	10.6	7.5	0.37
2009	31.06	1.3	2.11	1.2	4.52	77	15.6	5.9	7.6	6.2	10.5	34	24.1	10.5	6.3	11.2	8..5	0.46
2010	30.98	1.5	1.99	0.9	4.12	79	14.6	6.8	9.5	10.6	11.6	27	26.8	7.6	7.2	12.1	9.5	0.42

This table shows the extent of product diversification in designing indigenous traditional handicraft by the sample units by assessing the PCI index. Table show the result of the secondary data collected from the unpublished records of 12 units, four each, conveniently selected from the aforementioned three groups of units. PCI ≤ 50 (participant's observation) was accepted as benchmark to access the efficacy of each group of units in applying product-design diversification.

The product concentration index, bench marking PCI ≤ 50 (participant's observation) reveals the efficacy of each group of units in applying product-design diversification. Based on the aforementioned analysis Fgure 1 highlight the area where intensity of threat is high, medium and low for the traditional products of Kerala compared with their rivalries.

Figure 1: Threat Intensity Matrix

Influence to Indigenous Traditional Products of Kerala

Risk

Market threats for the industry

	High	*Medium*	*Low*
High	*Product innovations*	*Changes in Technology*	
Medium	*Globalization* *Government regulations*	*Distribution channels* *Special interest group influence*	*Demographic changes*
Low			

This figure shows the threat intensity matrix

Besides the machine made crafts with innovative designs, dumping of low priced imported fake antiques with versatile designs, warns traditional craft industries of Kerala to shift from conventional methods of production to more product innovation strategies to meet diversified demands

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper presents the market realities for cottage industries engaged in production of indigenous traditional products in Kerala. Focusing on 200 rural artisans, randomly selected from traditional handcraft cooperative units, the study explores market threats for handmade products. The competitive strength of the sample units were compared with their rivalry units by measuring the key factors that determine the success of craft marketing on a ten point scale. Competitor profile matrix reveals that product quality is the main strength for handmade products, however, these units fail to compete with the private and government sponsored production units with innovative distribution, promotion and customer service strategies. This study identifies the lack of innovative design as a severe threat. Therefore, to win global demands, the traditional handmade products have to traverse with diversified market strategies.

One limitation common with most of the works in this area is availability of data to consider the influence of other factors on threat analysis. The relative impact of anticipated market threats was assessed based on the perception of rural artisans on their own market as well as their competitors' strategies. Taking into account the gap in primary data on competitors' opinion on their market strategies, we acknowledge the need for further research in this area to explore the efficacy of traditional handicraft units to accommodate strategies as well to challenge market threats.

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