

Abstract

The economic and social trajectory of artisan labour in a rapidly growing economy is one characterised by deep transformations. In many cases, such transformation involves a general decline. One of the main reasons is the loss of market share as a consequence of competition from mass-produced goods. This leads to a reduction in the number of artisans working as independent producers, and a transformation of the production process into one characterised by property-less workers and owners of capital resources. Evidence emerging from one of the largest artisan communities in India seems to confirm this general trajectory. Whether this is a necessary outcome of growth needs to be questioned. The paper draws on findings emerging from the study of the art metalware industry in Moradabad, India, in order to explore the mechanisms that explain why artisans are increasingly being pushed into poverty. The paper also presents some conclusions concerning the shortcomings of government policy. It shows that the problem lies not only in generating more income at the level of the industry as a whole. It also lies in the mechanisms that determine how total income is distributed within the industry. Findings from the industry in Moradabad show that the issue of income distribution is not automatically resolved through higher productivity and market access. A broader vision on the issue of poverty alleviation amongst artisan communities is therefore warranted.

Keywords: art metalware industry, handicrafts, India, poverty in India

Natalie Gupta is a Doctoral Research Associate at the Brooks World Poverty Institute, The University of Manchester, UK.