Having returned recently from a 20 days study-tour plus indigo workshop in India, I have been pondering the social and economic value societies assign to craft. I ask, how is craft valued in Australia versus in India?

**Defining craft**

The first issue is defining what craft is. One of the principles of design anthropology that I teach is to not make distinctions between art, craft, and design as it imposes a biased hierarchy on creative expression, with “art” at the top, “design” in the middle, and “craft” at the bottom, that is not universal to all cultures.

Laura Morelli provides an exceptional and short overview of the historical break of art away from craft in the Renaissance period and its implications for non-Western art/design/craft.

Laura Morelli’s TED Ed video on art versus craft.

Yet, the term craft exists and the hierarchy among the visual arts has significant implications in relationship to patronage, funding, and government policy for craft practices. The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides the most basic definition:

| an activity that involves making something in a skillful way by using your hands. |
Maybe, this definition can be a starting point for a longer conversation about craft in Australia, but also understanding craft in India.

**Framework for evaluating craft’s value**

In his 2004 *Craft Revival Trust* article, Indian designer and consultant Arvind Lodaya outlines three crises of craft in regards to livelihood, viability, and status as cultural assets. I will use livelihood and status as cultural assets to provide a useful comparative framework of the extent to which:

1. Craft is something by which Australians and Indians can derive a sustainable livelihood
2. Recognition by national bodies and the media is consistent.

**Australian and Indian craft livelihood**

Floral-printed and polka-dotted items at the 2010 Finders Keepers craft fair in Melbourne. Reuben Bedingfield/Flickr

There are numerically more people making a livelihood through craft in India compared to Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Work in Selected Culture and Leisure Activities, 2007 survey, 953,500 Australians were involved in craft (out of 10.5 million in the total labour force in 2007).

That is approximately 11% of the working population. Yet on average, only 14.6% of Australians involved in craft earned any payment for their works at all.

According to the Wage Indicator Foundation, the estimated living wage for Australia is A$16.37 an hour. Based on an average of having to work 195 hours per month, an Australian would have to earn A$3192.15 per month to support herself only through craft.

Do the numbers add up? It is difficult to calculate directly, but I offer an anecdotal example. At the last Shirt and Shirt maker fair I attended, I bought a reversible SO! Indesign wrap skirt by Melbourne designer Christina Jonsson for A$40.

On the web, the time allocated to sewing an intermediately complex reversible wrap skirt is 4-6 hours. Not including the price of material, if the labour attached to making the skirt was five hours, the price should have been approximately A$81.85. So her craft was undervalued.

What about livelihood in India? Out of a total of 417.2 million people working, Associate Professor Brinda Viswanathan of the Madras School of Economics has calculated that 16.7 million people work in the Indian craft sector.

This is approximately 4% of the working population. Compared to the Australian crafts person, the Indian crafts person does sell his or her wares. Jaya Jaitly describes in the article, *Craft as Industry*:

> Cultural demands of their communities or of their traditional customers keep them at bare subsistence level. Products thus continue to be made, and wherever they are in great demand artisan communities organise themselves in a variety of informal and semi-formal ways. It is important to remember that nearly all craft in India is community-based, tradition-driven, and purchased for cultural or utilitarian reasons by a largely domestic market.

The mostly domestic market means that the their traditional customers many not earn enough to allow the crafts person to earn a living wage. The Wage Indicator Foundation has calculated this to be 65 rupees (A$1.18) per hour. An Indian craftsperson would have to earn 10,725 rupees (A$230.10) per month through the craft. This is possible for crafts people with access to urban craft markets, like New Delhi’s Dilli Haat, and especially
international markets. But the majority do not have access these markets.

Indian designers, NGOs, and even philanthropic organisations describe the kinds of government and private investment needed to make Indian craft viable. *Craft Australia* until recently was the peak advocate for craft in Australia. Yet, to convince people to support craft, it has to be seen as a cultural asset.

**Australian and Indian craft as cultural assets**

If one looks at Australian government policies, national awards, and media attention, it could be argued that Australia does not value craft as a cultural asset. The Australian Federal Government has not provided a craft policy since the defunding of *Craft Australia* in 2011 and the transfer of the *Visual Arts and Craft Strategy* to the Australia Council.

While there are many regional craft awards and the Qantas Spirit of Youth awards for *Craft and Design Object*, there has been only one recent attempt to establish a national craft award—the 2013 Australian Craft Awards.

In terms of media attention, a Factiva news engine search of The Age, The Australian, and the Sydney Herald Sun from June 2013 – July 2014 resulted in 930 results, of which 233 were about craft beer. This is compared to 3,317 results for “design” and 4,948 results for “art”.

Maybe because of the dominance of the craft sector, the Indian government has long established policies to support craft. There is an official Government of India *Development Commissioner, Handicrafts* in the Ministry of Textiles. It has released its 12th 5-year plan schemes. At the beginning of July, it presented its National Award as well as two other awards for craft and weaving. This is in addition to the *Craft Council of India*’s four craft awards.

Factiva news search of the word “craft” in The Hindu, The Times of India, and India Today resulted in 2,138 results. This is compared to 11,980 results for “design” and 14,832 results for “art”. One would think that craft has
less importance than design and art. Yet when you look at the “art” articles, craft is often mentioned in the same breath. For example, when The Times of India recently announced a new art gallery in South Mumbai, it says:

*Drawn from the court rooms and out of pure passion, Naziya Merchant a solicitor by training, opened up Caravan Hands, a designer store cum art gallery to promote Indian artists and craftsmen.*

**Why the evaluation of craft matters?**

When I completed the indigo dyeing workshop, one of the things that most impressed me was how the process, the motifs, and the culture of India craft were all one. How India chooses to value its craft reflects how it values its cultural diversity. The same can be said for Australia. Whether it is diverse crafts of the Indigenous Australians, the European settlers, or the Asian and African migrants, when Australia loses its tangible connection to craft, it loses that unity that can come between who it is and what it makes.

These losses are not just felt on the individual level, but as a nation. Sometimes the advantage of travel is that it shows you how to better appreciate home. It would be good to see the support for craft in Australia as high as the support in India.