

India has become rapidly industrialised and no more so than in its footwear sector where export manufacturing has become highly sophisticated. The exodus of footwear production from Western countries has led to a loss of many traditional skills. It therefore comes as something of a surprise to discover that the same scenario is beginning to appear in developing countries such as India as Somenath Ganguly, director of the Central Footwear Training Institute in Agra, explains.

Last of the **hand last makers**



*Solid men's
fashion last*

The Indian shoe industry currently exports only 5% of its total production, mostly to Europe. In 2004 it produced 2,065 million pairs of footwear which is estimated to have increased a further 20% over the past two years. The remaining 95% of the shoes made in India are produced for the domestic market. The lasts required to make these shoes are mainly supplied by skilled craftsmen working in small roadside shops where they both produce and sell them. The bulk of these artisan last makers can be found in Agra, which is situated south-east of Delhi and is a major shoemaking centre.

Sophisticated last making factories have been operating for a number of years, supplying the mechanised footwear factories which in turn serve the growing export trade. There are now at least six modern last factories producing shoe lasts using the latest mechanised and computer-graded systems. The average production of these factories is about 3,500 pairs of lasts per day and they supply over 200 modern export-oriented shoe producers. Much of the domestic market, however, is served by the approximately 5,000 small-, medium-, and micro-sized shoe units working in and around Agra and these shoemakers are entirely dependent on handmade shoe lasts.



TRADITIONAL SKILLS

For those used to modern methods, it is difficult to imagine making lasts without using copying lathes and the latest technology and machinery. These craftsmen, however, produce highly accurate shoe lasts for the local industry entirely by hand, using only simple tools and equipment. Their skill and understanding of last making enable them to produce accurate, matching pairs of lasts with ease. A good example is Ashoke Kumar who, despite being illiterate, is a renowned model and last maker in Agra. One of his lasts is shown in the third illustration.

Although it is true that the quality of these wooden lasts is not

quite comparable with that of the plastic lasts made by sophisticated mechanised systems, one of the main reasons for this is the problem of finding suitable quality wood. The moisture content in freshly cut wood is about 80-90%, which after seasoning comes down to around 8-12%, and is acceptable for making shoe lasts. Unfortunately, this drying process can take from 12 to 14 weeks without the use of a seasoning kiln and as the artisan last makers are cash-poor and have no access to seasoning plants, they are forced to use unseasoned Shisham wood which is not ideal for use in quality lasts. As a result, lasts made with this unseasoned wood may begin to shrink within a few months, thus altering their dimensions. Therefore, the problem does not lie with the last makers but with the material shortages and financial constraints they have to work with.

The scoop block system used by Ashoke Kumar and other Agra last makers provides easy last slipping



PROBLEMS

A number of problems threaten the future livelihood of these highly skilled craftsmen:

1. A shortage of wood in the country. To protect the environment and tackle the problem of deforestation and erosion, the government has brought in a widespread ban on felling trees.
2. Financing the proper drying of timber is difficult.
3. There is competition from plastic lasts and lasts imported from neighbouring countries.
4. The last makers cannot secure finance to establish a mechanised factory.

These workers earn Rs100-150 (\$2.5-\$4) per day in competition with machine-made lasts, but they may soon lose their jobs and be forced to leave the industry to seek other employment or may even be forced to beg on the streets. They have provided major support to the domestic footwear industry in India and, even today, India's domestic shoe market would be in serious trouble were it not for the lasts they produce. Nobody in authority appears

to either understand or have the will to tackle the problem, so there is now a serious risk that their skills will be lost forever.

OPPORTUNITY

Although the future of this industry is under threat, there may be opportunities for the government to help these last makers and enable them to continue to supply the small footwear manufacturers, who are themselves an important sector of the industry serving local demand. One idea is for a cluster development programme and facility to be established which could provide a number of benefits:

1. The provision of a seasoning kiln to be shared by the last makers—a step which could be achieved quickly.
2. Government support in obtaining suitable supplies of timber and establishing a replanting programme.
3. The provision of training courses with a view to developing their skills as model makers and becoming a potential asset to the mechanised last factories.
4. The establishment of a modern mechanised last making facility where machines would be made available on a shared basis and suitable training provided.
5. Importing plastic blocks on a non profit basis to use in this facility.

Only hand tools are used to measure and shape the last



If action is not taken very soon, the hand made wooden last industry will cease to exist and the artisans' skills will be lost. Modern global footwear producers may forget about them, but, the people who are emotionally involved with shoemaking will never forget either the contribution that they have already made or the contribution they could continue to make in the expansion of the modern footwear industry in India. To plan the proper development of India's shoe industry, the inherent skills of these artisans need to be fully utilised. Not only will this benefit the industry, it will offer the artisans an opportunity to earn a livelihood and continue to serve the shoe industry as they have in the past. 