

## **Empowering Artisans: Unlocking Rural Markets for Craft Revival**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Over 200 million people's lives in India are linked to the artisan sector, either directly or indirectly. The environment in this sector is mostly informal, rural and driven by innovation, with a high concentration of MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium-sized) firms, consisting mainly of labour-intensive and skill-intensive workers. India's second greatest source of employment and livelihood after agriculture is the artisan economy (Kapur et al., 2022), which has a widespread reach, unlike modern manufacturing methods confined to a few geographic areas.*

*This paper explores the importance of reviving craft-based businesses in India. They act as a source of employment for millions and preserve the country's rich heritage and culture, as well as drive economic growth. Despite facing challenges like having to compete with industrial manufacturing and meeting consumers' demands, rural artisans adapt to meet the changing times. This paper advocates for better support systems, more suitable access to resources, and ways to connect with a community to boost sales and promote their small businesses, to reinforce the significance of crafts as a cornerstone of India's cultural and economic landscape.*

**Keywords:** Rural artisans, economy, crafts, employment, markets

### **Introduction**

Crafts have, throughout history, proven to be a prime source of job creation (Sanchis et al., 2016). The European Network of Rural Artisans defines crafts as “part of the economy, due to their capacity to generate employment, as an element of social cohesion in the territories and as a potential tourist resource and distinctive culture resource of the counties.”

Craft-based businesses in India have tailored their business models to meet the requirements of people in scattered, remote, often inaccessible rural areas. This is significant since women and other marginalized groups make up over 50% of India's artisans, whose movement is severely limited due to cultural and societal conventions (Bellver et al., 2023). According to Richards and

Sanchis, Serrano and Köster, several case studies have shown how, as a result of connections between businesses, the growth of local trade, and the promotion of employment, crafts have experienced a significant expansion in the 21st century. However, crafts need a nurturing environment to thrive and a sense of culture, which is to be supported by policies, education and optimum organization (Bellver et al., 2023).

The scope for craft businesses and rural markets has diversified and evolved into a major source of revenue for India in the last few years. The handloom and handicraft sectors are generally located in clusters- small areas, sometimes centuries old, made up mostly of household units. India is said to have over 3000 units spread across its rural areas (Kotipalli, 2018). If harnessed efficiently to their full potential, rural markets can serve as the cornerstone for growth, innovation, supply chains, and business networks (Kapur et al., 2022), acting as a catalyst for change, economic growth and financial independence for those involved.

Artisans have the opportunity to contribute to social development through rural markets, making the revival of arts and crafts imperative. Fueled by consumer demand, there has been a major resurgence of craft-based businesses in India. Some of the key approaches for craft revival are promoting indigenous culture, building retail value, providing infrastructural support, social networking, helping the artisans use technology effectively, and creating a better network between suppliers and consumers (Kumar & Banerjee, 2023). It is also a highly effective way of amplifying heritage crafts or artisanal practices that have been in families for decades.

Crafts help preserve India's rich cultural tapestry, using traditions and history. The Indian artisan industry is unorganized, decentralized and widespread, with no single force in charge. While this is a bane for centralized policies and schemes, it also means that there is enormous untapped market potential across the country (Dash & Mishra, 2021).

## **Background**

The history of rural art/artisans can be traced back to different time periods in different parts of the world. The Arts and Crafts movement originated in Britain in the 1860s, created by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, which aimed to promote handicrafts and decorative arts. Drawing inspiration from medieval times, they wanted to bring back the honesty of expression in craftsmanship by making simpler designs, but with modern elements. The movement spread over Europe and North America (Renauld, 2020). In Britain, the movement gained traction, its core being nostalgia- thinking back to rural traditions and 'the simple life'. The pioneers of the movement revived craft traditions and created employment for locals, making more of an impact on the rural economy, rather than the urban (Arts and Crafts: An Introduction).

While countries like Britain, France, Belgium and Switzerland experienced and saw drastic changes during the First Industrial Revolution, the USA underwent similar changes decades later, during the Second Industrial Revolution. The Americans reinterpreted the movement's philosophy and adopted an opposite attitude, leaning towards mechanized work. They began designing furniture using local materials by the use of machines. Frank Lloyd Wright, one of modern architecture's founders, advocated for the advantages of machine work for the future of arts and crafts (Renauld, 2020).

In Russia during the 19th century, Abramtsevo was an artists' colony outside of Moscow that fostered the revival of Russian folk art and traditional crafts. With several notable artists, writers and actors flocking to the colony to escape the bustle of Moscow, it quickly gained a reputation for being a breeding ground for creatives and for the revival of arts and crafts. Aside from working on their own projects, the creatives who visited also helped in developing the estate, making the buildings some of the first in the Art Nouveau style in Russia. The colony also opened a pottery workshop, giving way to the first ever, now world-renowned Matryoshka doll (Yaldazeh et al., 2024).

India, since early colonial rule, served as a focal point for discussions surrounding craft and community for the British. Anthropologist Henry Maine saw the country as utopian, a pre-capitalist stage of Britain's threshold to modernity. Looking at the massive documentation process in the 1880s, Abigail McGowan suggested that the colonial government defined crafts in India as a "culturally bound, ethnographically defined artisanal body, rooted in local practices, traditions, and communities as the gazetteers of the 1880s presented products defined by the distinctive features (marriage customs, gods, etc) of the caste and community that made them." (Chatterjee, 2020)

In recent times, global markets have been taking inspiration from rural life and experimenting with rustic art styles and craft techniques. Design has seen a radical departure from being steeped in urbanism since the Industrial Revolution, moving towards more simple aspects (Rawsthorn, 2010). There are, unfortunately, pitiable benefits that go towards the artisans. Steadily rising competition, the absence of organized support, and the unavailability of capital are only the tip of the iceberg, which is the list of challenges the artisanal workforce faces. These unaddressed challenges deter the next generations from pursuing crafts professionally. During British rule, Indian craftspeople had to lower the quality of products to keep up with industrial-level outputs. Post-Independence, the government created subsidies for cottage industries. India became one of the earliest developing nations to include artisans in its national economic development framework (Banerjee & Mazzarella, 2022), and yet, there are no formal structures to assist them.

Rural marketing has evolved with the changing needs of global consumers, from traditional marketing being self-sufficient to modern marketing using social media. Affordability, information disparity, and unorganized channels of distribution (Das, 2018) are some of the biggest setbacks that rural markets face. According to a paper on the history of markets, their scope expanded rapidly from the 15th to 17th centuries, which saw an increase in credit and growth of trade (Casson & Lee), and at the same time, periods of stagnation owing to natural disasters led to instability.

Currently, in India, the government is putting several infrastructural improvement projects into action in rural areas. Its major goal is to boost the flow of products, enhancing consumption and the potential for income growth. The 'Digital India' initiative has been set in motion, attempting to reach previously unserviceable rural areas. Streamlining supply chain management, improving connectivity, and dealing with the logistics of accessibility, and media reach are some of the many areas that require attention (Rural Marketing).

### **Discussion**

As a result of urbanisation, rural artisans have seen their fair share of obstacles. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, T.B. Jordan invented the first wood-carving machine (Renauld, 2020), which essentially did the work equivalent to multiple workers. Machines replaced handwork and the quality of arts and crafts declined, leading to several artisans losing their jobs. Artisans are the backbone of the Indian economy, and yet, they are deprived of benefits, financial aid, and have low to no access to government schemes (Sharan et al., 2020).

Rural artisans are forced to compete with industry-based production but must be equipped to do so effectively. Most artisans are illiterate, which means they remain unaware of government schemes that might benefit them. They are also distanced from marketing strategies that other businesses use to promote themselves to bigger markets. After losing percentages to middlemen, suppliers, and distributors, they are left with a meagre amount, leaving them below the poverty line time and again. It is a vicious cycle of low income leading to low-quality materials, paired with no marketing strategies, yet again leading to low income (Yadav, 2012). Although rural artisans today have better opportunities by using e-commerce, there still exist obstacles in the way of closing the digital divide.

The significance of rural arts and crafts over the years has ebbed and flowed with the advent of the digital age. Artisans in India have changed the way the handicraft sector operates, creating new prospects for themselves and attempting to give the field a better name and future. With artisans taking inspiration from Indian heritage, the industry is embracing the rich culture by incorporating elements of traditional arts like sculptures and carvings into their work (Sharan et

al., 2020). Each handmade piece is unique, giving consumers an exclusive artistic experience with each product.

With all of this information in hand, it begs the question- is there a truly one-size-fits-all solution to market artisanal products and gain traction? Digital advancements have opened up global markets, overcoming barriers of geography and enhancing networking and communication. Big businesses have access to social media and can reach a wide audience to market their wares, but small businesses are excluded from the digital marketing landscape due to the lack of Internet access. Without the Internet, it is difficult for rural artisans to build brand loyalty and grow their sales (Haider et al., 2024). Cottage industries, referred to as the ‘invisible backbone’ of rural economies, preserve ancient craftsmanship passed down through generations. These artisans are resilient, choosing to continue their art in the face of adversity and uncertainty. Women, especially, find economic independence and freedom of expression through their work (Gogoi, 2024), giving them the satisfaction of selling goods made with their own hands, without a machine.

These artisans play a monumental role in society, bringing sustainability and ingenuity to the public through their industriousness. One particular study (Meng Qu & Zollet, 2023) proposed organising small-scale regional art festivals to maximise the potential and revitalize rural communities. Since the craftspeople have limited reach to market their products to the wider masses, organising a festival where consumers can gain direct access to multiple artisans and their wares can help give them the exposure they direly need and deserve. This will also lead to increased community involvement and social engagement, both of which are vital to boost sales.

Big global brands like West Elm and IKEA collaborate with rural artisans worldwide in the production of their products, but they go unnoticed in the grand scheme of things. Most artistic communities lack the resources to get the same level of visibility and recognition by themselves. The artisan sector is the single largest employer of women across the world (Osit, 2023), and with the right marketing efforts, it has the potential to be the most profitable.

Penny Sparke traced the history of design to the expansion of the market for consumer goods, calling it “design’s inevitable link with the growth of capitalist economy.” (1991) When it comes to the production of goods, increased consumption patterns saw the transition from home-based craft production to mass manufacturing in factories. Modernity saw a paradoxical relationship with the arts; on one hand, modernists argued for “the art that is life” (Kaplan, 1987) but the arts that they argued in favour of were increasingly separated from the masses (Stankiewicz, 1992), making it irrelevant. Several organisations work towards developing a better grassroots-to-consumer value chain to modernise the traditional system of distribution (Krishnamoorthy et al., 2023).

The marketing techniques that rural artisans use are few and far between, there are more that are unused. The expertise and skills that these artisans have must be leveraged to provide them with the best possible outcome for their efforts. Through no fault of their own, these craftspeople have no means of promoting themselves. Agencies dedicated to supporting artisans have formulated a list of suggestions- creating better infrastructure support, giving artisans incentives to boost participation in markets, opening shops for raw materials (Dash & Mishra, 2021) in nearby localities, and giving artisans easy access to them, among others.

Advertising products as ‘artisanal’ has a significant impact on consumers in two ways, they can be found in true artisanal shops, with a genuine connection between the makers and the products, or they can be found in global chains, marking a stark disconnect between the manufactured products and the term itself in its true essence. Combining the fundamental 4 Ps of marketing, Product, Price, Place, and Promotion, would prove highly advantageous for artisans to position themselves in the market. Developing communication strategies will also help build meaningful relationships with their target audience (Villarreal, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

The revival of crafts-based businesses in India is more than a celebration of culture and heritage, it is a vital economic strategy that fosters employment opportunities for the marginalised. The historical context and background of crafts around the world prove its deep-rooted significance in rural economies, emphasizing its role as a viable source of income and community building. While crafts have adapted to modern consumer demands, the artisans face marked challenges, including competition from factory-produced goods, restricted access to resources and a lack of awareness about government schemes and benefits.

To effectively harness the full potential of the artisan sector, it is imperative to create a nurturing environment by formulating policies that offer maximal support to their needs, empowering artisans through education, and aiding them in devising practical marketing strategies. Initiatives like ‘Digital India’ are promising steps towards bridging the digital gap between the urban and rural populations, enabling artisans to reach wider markets. Encouraging connections between artisans and consumers can enhance their unique products and the human stories behind each piece.

It is essential to prioritise infrastructure development and community engagement in the future. Organising art festivals to display several artisans’ wares collectively in one location is an effective way of giving them visibility and a way for consumers to recognise their efforts. This also ensures fair compensation for the artisans, omitting the need for middlemen. Ultimately, for the survival and expansion of India’s artisan sector, they must be recognised for their



contributions to economic growth, employment opportunities, and social change. By empowering artisans further, India can build a more inclusive and sustainable economy that honours craftspeople's generational skills and ingenuity.

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