

Challenges and Problems Faced by the Indian Handloom and Handicraft Industry

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ABSTRACT

The handloom and handicraft industry is the second largest employment industry after agriculture in rural and semi-urban India. This sector is an unorganized sector that faces major issues and challenges to exist in its operations. This sector is responsible for preserving and promoting the old Indian culture and heritage through its arts. Their lives are full of endless challenges for long. With the arrival of the pandemic, their situation became worsened. Post-pandemic also, this sector is trying to fight and beat the impacts of the pandemic and struggling for their revival. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the challenges handloom workers and handicraftsmen face. The aim of this paper is to investigate the challenges faced by the workers and artisans of the Indian handloom and handicraft industry. Also, the effects of covid-19 on the life of the workers and artisans of the Indian handloom and handicrafts industry are explored.

Keywords: *Handloom and handicraft industry; Covid-19 pandemic; Challenges; Indian Handloom and handicrafts.*

1.0 Introduction

Indian handloom and handicrafts have always been a matter of attraction not only within the boundaries of India but across the globe also. The way Indian artisans, weavers, and craftspeople crave and present their emotions in the fabrics is really commendable. India is a diverse nation and owns a huge variety of art and artists which is evident through the artistic work Indian weavers and artisans put into the threads and fabrics and make it appreciable across the globe.

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India is owning this legacy since the Indus Valley civilization and it continues to develop into multiples since then. India's first ever handcrafted textiles came in the form of cotton sarees back in 3000 B.C. and then onwards India kept on innovating numerous beautiful creations in the industry of textiles and handicrafts. Indian textiles are considered India's valuable heritage and their mentions can be found in the era of Mahabharata, Ajanta caves, and also in Sanskrit literature.

The credit for this invaluable art is solely possessed by the artisans and workers who put extreme efforts into their art to make each one of them a masterpiece. These artisans have been God gifted with an incredible talent of putting their culture, life, thoughts, emotions, nature, and everything else which they could have in their mind, into the piece of cloth so beautifully that it catches the attention of everyone just through a glance of an eye across the globe. These artisans have a major role in promoting and preserving the culture and artistic traditions of India. The hard work, efforts, and dedication of these people are really admirable and worth mentioning. These people are magicians of the industry when it comes to creating magic on fabrics.

But unfortunately, these magicians are not getting even a part of what they deserve. Every new day, they have to face various challenges for their existence and to continue their work. It is really disheartening to see that these people are even unable to make their two ends meet peacefully.

These artisans sometimes find it too difficult to stay in the fight and many of them had even abandoned their artistic and crafting works. The serious setbacks faced by this industry are a major reason behind all this. Even after showing such great excellence in their work, the exclusive work of these artisans faces ignorance in the light of fast fashion industries. There are numerous principal factors that are responsible for the exploitation and plight of these artisans and craftspeople as well as the concerned industry as a whole. The sector has already been facing various problems like improper power supply, poor roads and transportation facilities, extensive exploitation, restrictions in reaching wider markets, and much more. And the situation has worsened with the arrival of the pandemic.

It is brought many new presents to these already struggling people in the form of much harder challenges. With the arrival of this pandemic and also after it has been controlled, their consumptions dropped, orders cancelled, payments are still pending, traditional supply chains broke-down, offline modes of selling stopped, and what not. This pandemic has taken them too backward and now the list of problems they have to deal with has become much longer than their control. In order to safeguard the national, cultural, and traditional heritage brought forward through these artisans, there is a high need for proper implementation of various plans and policies with a view to helping this vulnerable yet talented sector. India being an emerging superpower economy, needs to

serve and save its great industries from the verge of depletion, and textile and handicraft industries employ a major proportion of the Indian population mainly the rural population and women employees.

2.0 Research Objectives

- To investigate the challenges faced by workers and artisans of the Indian handloom textiles and handicraft industry.
- To explore the effects of covid-19 on the life of the workers and artisans of the Indian handloom textiles and handicrafts industry.

3.0 Research Methodology

This paper is an outcome of in-depth research based on secondary data collected from several previously conducted research papers, journals, articles, magazines, newspapers, and media reports.

4.0 Literature Review

Mishra *et al.* (2022) The pillar of the Indian economy, semi-handcrafted and machine-made duplicates from China, Malaysia, and Indonesia among others, are putting up a valiant battle against it. Indians have become more aware in recent years of the value of defending traditional crafts against theft and unauthorized duplication, which has led the government to acknowledge the importance of IP rights for the crafts industry and to launch a global campaign under the Geographical Indications Act to safeguard India's traditional handicrafts.

Kanupriya (2021) brings into light major problems being faced by the concerned industry as an impact of COVID-19. One of the immediate effects of COVID-19 was the decline in sales as all the markets were shut down and social distancing came into effect immediately after the arrival of the pandemic. Although arguments related to online selling are being made, they could not prove an alternative to open selling. With the uncontrollable situation in hand, the government ordered the immediate closure of all 'non-essential goods manufacturing industry', and the textile industry falling into this category had to shut down its operations. Consequently, they had to face the worst crises ever. The import and export also stopped affecting global demand and supply. The falling production and local and global sales have worsened the conditions of the employees of the Indian textile industry. Factories shut down and non-payment of wages is another

threat being faced by these people. Also, a large proportion of the population engaged in this sector involves women, so the government should not afford to ignore all these difficulties faced by the concerned hard-working handloom and handicrafts sector.

Kaur (2021) made an attempt to throw light on the issues and challenges faced by the textile entrepreneurs of Punjab due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She has applied the factor analysis technique to summarise the variables into factors. During COVID-19, seven business-related concerns were found, the most significant of which was the impact on working capital and the cost of capital. Employment, being digitally capable, the impact on future market promotions, opportunities in the face of hardship, health concerns, items in transit, and no impact on work. She also measured the stress level of sample businessmen using a stress questionnaire and it was found that almost 80% of the entrepreneurs were suffering from any kind of mental or physical illness.

While examining, it was found that the factor named “impact on working capital” has played a major role in affecting the stress of entrepreneurs. As their previously booked orders were either cancelled or postponed due to the pandemic. The other factors contributing to the stress was “digital capability” which negatively affected their stress level as they had the knowledge of digital technologies and their capabilities but they didn’t know how to utilize them for their betterment. The factor “opportunities in hardships” was of some relief as some manufacturers shifted to the manufacturing of PPE kits and masks, but it also required varied expertise for maintaining social distancing, regular disinfecting and sanitization of the workplace, personal safety of the workforce were the major matters of concern.

Ashwathi (2020) The study shows that the GI Act does not adequately safeguard producers’ interests. One of the producers or manufacturers claimed that although there is a law pertaining to GI, it is not being implemented while the empirical investigation was being conducted. The relevant authorities are completely ignorant of it. The act’s failure to stop the use of goods without authorization is another problem brought up by the producer. There are a lot of imitation GI goods on the market. One of the biggest difficulties that producers encounter is this. The government is not attempting to export GI goods to other nations. Another difficulty faced by the producers is the general lack of knowledge about GI among consumers. Customers primarily purchase the GI registered product due to its widespread use. Therefore, it is clear that the GI Act falls short of achieving its main goals.

Banik (2017) reveals that the condition that the artisans are compelled to face is one of the major reasons for all their plights. The importance of the products manufactured or crafted by these people is declining in their localities. As the competition is rising due to machine-made products, and also the machine-manufactured goods are cheaply

available, thus, handicrafts artisans are under-pressure to deteriorate the quality of their products. Craftsmen are widely regarded as the backbone of India's non-farm rural economy; according to official estimates, there are 7 million artisans in India (up to 200 million according to unofficial sources) who make their living via craft manufacturing. Despite the fact that India's industrialization and globalization, i.e. involvement in the contemporary world economy, millions of Indians still rely on indigenous modes of production, traditional techniques, and skills to manufacture handcrafted items.

These rural craftsmen's economic situations are far from satisfactory, which weakens their marketing potential at both the selling and purchasing levels. These craftsmen are either ignorant or have a poor degree of education, and their connections to rural development agencies are inadequate. These craftsmen have lost their traditional rural market and livelihood income due to increased competition from mill-made items and decreased rural community-consuming power due to the current economic situation. According to a survey, artisans' households have substantially lower net wealth, and 90% of them are landless. For a household of five, the average monthly income generated by these artists is Rupees 2,000. The contemporary plight of India's craftsmen is a source of grave worry. Government programs have emphasized creating jobs and raising export profits since the early twentieth century, although most craftsmen continue to live in abject poverty. Most artisans have given up and moved away from their original vocation in the face of persistent difficulty.

The Indian handloom and handicraft sector, albeit historically important and culturally vibrant, encounters numerous obstacles that impede its development. The procurement of raw materials such as cotton, silk, and jute is a continual challenge. Weavers, particularly in rural regions, have challenges because to escalating costs and restricted access to these materials, compounded by geographic distances from suppliers (Ghouse, 2017; Sharma *et al.*, 2007). The rising costs of yarn and dyes are resulting in a scarcity that affects production capacity. (Sharma *et al.*, 2007)

Technological obsolescence is a significant concern, as the sector predominantly depends on conventional methods that diminish efficiency relative to mechanized manufacturing processes. Restricted access to contemporary tools and design innovation impedes the industry's ability to compete globally (Ghouse, 2017). The handloom sector under significant pressure because to market rivalry from domestic power looms and international imports, especially following WTO liberalization. Countries such as China, who manufacture textiles at reduced costs, present a considerable challenge to the market share of Indian artisans (Atkar *et al.*, 2021).

Moreover, the sector encounters infrastructure obstacles. The absence of fundamental amenities like land, electricity, and water, especially in rural production

zones, hinders artisans from expanding their businesses. Investment in capacity building and infrastructure is insufficient, constraining growth prospects (Sharma *et al.*, 2007; Ghouse, 2017).

Government initiatives designed to enhance the circumstances for craftsmen have shown minimal success owing to inadequate execution and insufficient awareness among the weavers (Agrawal, 2021). Inadequate coordination among agencies and reduced budget allocations exacerbate challenges in revitalizing the sector (Ghouse, 2017). Sundari, (2017) Handloom weaving is spread across many states in the country and is in considerable decline in some of them. For instance, many districts in Telangana have seen a decrease in weaving activities, while the coastal belt in Andhra Pradesh continues to be strong in handloom weaving. Most districts in Karnataka saw a steady drop in the number of handlooms. The same is the case in Maharashtra and parts of Uttar Pradesh. It is interesting to note the parallel growth in power looms in all the areas where handlooms weakened.

Datta & Bhattacharyya (2016) put great emphasis on the marketing problem of handicrafts. Their study revealed that in terms of marketing, artists encounter a number of challenges. Due to a lack of financial resources and a modest scale of business, artisans are unable to engage in advertising exposure.

As a result, the Corporation may want to expand promotion and marketing for all of the crafts. By acquiring products at remunerative rates from craftsmen and making timely payments, the Corporation may save craftspeople from the clutches of intermediaries. One of the causes for India's low proportion in the global craft market might be a lack of effective execution of government programs and schemes for handicraft exporters. The majority of handicraft exporters are unaware of what is going on at the government level to promote the handicraft sector.

The government has implemented a number of programs and attempts to promote the business, but exporters have been slow to respond due to a lack of understanding. The amount of export incentives provided by their various governments is where there is the most intense international rivalry with other handicraft exporting nations. Subsidies in the electricity, transportation, raw materials, and tariff disadvantages, among other areas, enable India's rivals to better bargain with purchasers. In comparison to the amount of subsidies and incentives provided by governments in other competing nations, the Indian government's incentives and subsidies on handicraft exports have not delighted handicraft exporters as much as those provided by rival international exporters.

Kumar & Rajeev (2013) focussed on some major challenges that were being faced by the Indian handicraft artisans during that time which include a lack of brand image as brand image act as a strong stimulator for customers by persuading them to buy the

products but this factor seems totally absent in case of handicraft industry as there is no branding which could distinguish these products.

Another one is the low prices of handicraft products as there are no fixed criteria related to the pricing of these products and the product price tends to be fixed by the bargaining capability of the customers, resulting in the exploitation of the hard work of these artisans. The other stimulating factor is product quality which the artisans fail to maintain due to the various everyday challenges they face in their work like poor work sheds, unavailability of good quality raw material, less attractive packaging, etc. due to the financial crises faced by them.

The foundation of the Indian handloom and handicraft industry was already very weak even before the hard hit of the pandemic due to various reasons like lack of technology upgradation, illiterate workforce, poor marketing strategies, and a lot more. And the arrival of the pandemic has further pushed down the already fallen sector. COVID-19 has a wide range of effects on the Indian textile sector. The pandemic has practically hit every aspect of the Indian handloom and handicrafts business, whether it be demand or supply, inputs or production. Some researchers have done in-depth research highlighting the issues, challenges, and problems faced by this sector as a result of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Siddiqui, an Artisan entrepreneur, Bidri Craft also focussed on several challenges faced by them during the pandemic in the post-COVID-19 report conducted by the British council named “Reimagining the crafts economy” in partnership with the Fashion Revolution India. Because of the complete lockdown that came with COVID-19, the markets stopped, demand and supply broke, orders were cancelled, payments were pending, and artisans find it very difficult even to make both ends meet. All these factors compelled the artisans to sell their products at very low prices in order to get food for themselves as well as their families. Artisans and looms were left vacant without any work. Even after the end of the lockdown, they faced severe issues because of the less number and volume of orders. They were unable to decide which among the pandemic and not having sufficient resources to make their livelihoods was more dangerous. Even post lockdown their work and income were not consistent. Consequently, most of them had to migrate back to their villages due to a lack of work opportunities.

Pandey, CEO of Mijwan Welfare Society (MWS) shared that, “we were facing a dilemma - protection from covid or ensuring economic support - which was more critical to work towards. What were the risks we should take? Many rural workers working on daily wages came back to the villages during covid. We had more than 700 people who reached out seeking jobs but there were no opportunities in the rural areas. We helped them get access to Government relief schemes”. Ahmed (1999) Due to numerous issues

and obstacles surrounding this business, The oldest and most significant cottage industry is currently in danger of being extinct. The weavers struggle to find high-quality raw materials at reasonable prices and delivery times. Additionally, the lack of working capital and inadequate modern technologies that are necessary to sustain the efficient flow of production are a problem for weavers.

5.0 Major Challenges Faced by the Handloom and Handicraft Sector: Pre-Covid Period

- 1. Inadequate finance:** As these workers and craftspeople are financially weak, thus they have to depend on the village moneylenders for money which in turn charges high rates of interest which these people find difficult to pay. If they fail to pay either or both of the interest and principal amount, then they become obliged to sell their products to these moneylenders at a very less rates which is much lower than the market price, or sometimes even they are forced to give their products to these moneylenders from free. These people also face difficulty in buying raw materials due to their poor financial condition. Although the government has announced loans and funds to such people at good concessions, they are unable to avail them as banks require various formalities to be completed. The artisans are still waiting for some simplified policies for the availability of loans so that they can save their businesses as well as livelihoods. As lack of funds is the crux of all the problems of these artisans.
- 2. Illiteracy:** As these people are uneducated, thus they face numerous problems like availing benefits of government policies, stock management, making communications with traders and middlemen, making business connections, etc.
- 3. Lack of access to quality raw material:** Unavailability of fine quality raw material is also a big issue in front of these artisans as due to their weak purchasing power they can't buy the raw material from good sources in bulk quantity thus they have to depend upon the middlemen or dealers for their raw material which provide them even the poor quality materials at very high price. For low quantity, they can't even bargain much, and thus they are forced to buy poor quality raw materials and that too at very high prices.
- 4. Poor and outdated skills:** Artisans are not backed up by huge finances which for investing in proper training and skills development and improvement on a regular basis.
- 5. Lack of technology upgradation:** Due to financial deficits they are unable to reach the latest and advanced technologies which directly impact their work and they are

lagging behind. Their conditions compel them to keep on using old tools and methods in their work.

- 6. Customers' shift from handmade products to industrial products in rural areas:** As industrial products are available in wide varieties, cheap rates, and good and attractive packaging, even the people of rural areas get attracted towards such products leading to a decrease in the demand of locally manufactured products. With the emerging and expanding globalization and the availability of cheaper products, these products are considered old-fashioned, traditional, and unsuitable for modern tastes. Due to these reasons, these artisans find it extremely difficult to stay in this cut-throat competition.
- 7. Poor infrastructural facilities:** The unavailability of infrastructural facilities like proper and hygienic workplaces, storage houses, communication, packing, and transportation facilities make it difficult for artisans to sell their products to a wide range of consumers. Also being uneducated, they fail to sell their products using online platforms.
- 8. Low income and irregular work:** Craft artists' pay is insufficient; even the greatest wages are modest in comparison to those in agriculture or other non-firm industries. Craft craftsmen's poverty is exacerbated by a combination of poor earnings and insufficient labour. Manufacturing for the domestic market differs significantly from production for the commercial market. If artists want to gain and preserve a place in this competitive and dynamic market, they must be sensitive to change, have good quality control, and precise costing. To put it another way, the correct mix of human, financial, physical, and social capital is critical.
- 9. Marketing support:** These artisans don't know good marketing tactics thus they find it difficult to establish proper communication with the consumers. They are required to depend on middlemen for selling their products who in turn consume most of the profits. They even do not get a proper place, means, and resources to display and outlay their products in big markets and broader customers.
- 10. Lack of aggregation:** Aggregation is the process of combining products from decentralized manufacturing units in order to achieve economies of scale in transportation, storage, and sale. Because of India's poor infrastructure and connectivity, collecting items is a difficult operation that contributes to many of the current bottlenecks in the crafts supply chain. There are currently no organized procedures in place to efficiently collect items from small producers, conduct quality checks, keep approved goods in warehouses, and distribute them to wholesalers and merchants in metropolitan regions.

6.0 Challenges and Issues Faced by the Handloom and Handicraft Sector: Post-Pandemic

- 1. Decreasing exhibitions and trade fairs:** The major scope of selling the products of Indian artisans is in the exhibitions and trade fairs. At such places, they can showcase their arts and skills in their products to a wide variety of customers outside their regions with their limited resources and efforts. Prior to the pandemic, these places were the most prevailing opportunities for these people. But as the pandemic hit, these exhibitions and trade fairs were stopped, and even post-lockdown the number of such physical markets was lessened resulting in plunging their sales.
- 2. Need for working capital:** Post-pandemic, the artisans were not left with any reserves and funds as the pandemic worsened their condition. In order to bring them back on track they need adequate immediate support in the form of monetary assistance from the government.
- 3. Tech-illiteracy:** the handloom and handicrafts artisans do not have the knowledge of new advanced and latest technology which leaves them non-tech-savvy. Digital technology has become an important part of people's life, especially after the hit of the pandemic. Both the sellers as well as the buyers are using digital technologies to run their business. Rural artisans being totally technology illiterate are unable to utilize this niche and thus, find it difficult to exist in the modern market.
- 4. Orders cancellation and postponement:** As with the arrival of the pandemic their orders got cancelled or postponed, resultingly in their products remaining in warehouses for a long time and they were unable to reimburse even the cost they had incurred in the production of those products. Additionally, they are bearing the burden of storage costs too.
- 5. Breaking down of traditional supply chain:** With the arrival of the pandemic, their traditional supply chain got broken. Most of their contracts with the dealers and traders have been broken and now they are left with no channels for completing the demand and supply of their products. Being uneducated and unaware of the scenario it is quite difficult for them to establish new channels for demand and supply.
- 6. Payments stuck:** Due to the uncertain arrival of COVID-19, these artisans were unable to realize their order payments and most of them even didn't get their wages. It is disheartening to know that today, even after 2 years of the hit of COVID-19, their payments are still stuck and not realized yet.
- 7. Digital payments:** After the hit of the pandemic, digital technologies are a part and parcel of everyone's life. Today, people prefer online activities more than physical dealings. Be it selling' purchasing' making or taking payments' etc. But these artisans

being technology backward, are not friendly with online modes of payments which is also a reason for restriction in their trading.

7.0 Prospects for the Betterment of Indian Artisans

- The first and foremost need is promoting the marketing of the products manufactured by Indian artisans locally as well as globally as today the customers are more internet friendly and they want everything to be available to them in just a single click.
- In order to upgrade and develop the skills of these artisans' proper and systematic training could be provided to these people at regular intervals of time.
- More health-related schemes are also required to be implemented in the form of insurance, health care centers, etc specifically to safeguard and secure the life and health of these artisans.
- The financial institutions and banks should also take interest and assist these people by making them aware of the government benefits which these artisans could avail for their betterment.
- To meet the modern demands, tastes, and preferences of the customers, some significant plans and policies are also required to be made to make these people aware of the latest fashion and designs and they should also be trained to implement those in their artworks.
- Physical markets like exhibitions and trade fairs should be organized at several places and times specifically displaying the products of Indian handloom and handicraft artisans.
- Artisans should also be trained for using digital technologies to run their businesses.
- Government grants are also required to be provided with a view of providing financial assistance to handloom and handicraft workers.
- Most artisans do not have proper accommodation facilities, government housing can prove to be very helpful in providing better accommodation facilities to these people.

8.0 Conclusion

The condition of the artisans of the Indian handloom and handicraft industry has always been endangered. They have to face numerous challenges to earn their livelihood. Even before the pandemic, they had to face various problems in procuring raw materials, financial crises, competition from mill-made products, pressure from traders, dealers, middlemen, local money lenders, etc. They had never been successful in availing the full-

ledged benefits of the government policies and schemes made for their betterment. Their struggle to retain in the competition is absolutely tough. And the arrival of COVID-19 worked as a supplement to their already existing problems. The arrival of the pandemic has made their lives worst.

Today, they have to fight even for their daily bread. Their products are lying worthless and they have yet not realized their payments which were stuck due to the pandemic. The pandemic has totally derailed their work and lives. Even after the pandemic, they are finding it difficult to come back on track. The need is to bring out the products to a much wider reach and allow them to attract the global markets also without unnecessary restrictions. The role of middlemen should be decreased in order to allow artisans to get fair rewards in return for their beautiful art and hard work. Artisans should be made capable of utilizing modern marketing techniques. Efforts are also required to be done to bring those artisans back on track who were hardly hit by the pandemic and finding it difficult to make a comeback to their profession. There is a need to strengthen this sector in all aspects by providing them the required support and assistance to make them stable to fight such uncertain challenges in future.

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