

## **Reviving the Craft Economy: Case Studies on Building Resilience for Indian Artisans**

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La Martiniere For Boys

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Indian handicraft sector, rich in cultural heritage and sustainable practices, provides vital livelihoods across rural communities. Despite its global appeal, artisans face challenges including market access, declining incomes, challenging input supply due to environmental degradation, and socio-economic challenges. This paper examines two case studies- wooden toy-making and bamboo furniture craftsmanship- to analyze their economic, social, and environmental impact. It reveals that while traditional practices promote sustainability and employment, they are under threat due to modern competition, poor infrastructure, multiplicity of middlemen, and lack of institutional support. Both case studies highlight the importance of policy reforms and solutions on both the demand and supply side, such as updating forest laws, improving transport connectivity, encouraging digital platforms, and providing design and entrepreneurial training.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The handicraft sector forms an integral part of India's cultural identity and economic fabric. The sector not only preserves the nation's artistic heritage but also plays a crucial role in providing employment, particularly for rural and marginalized communities. However, despite a growing domestic and international market for these sustainable goods, artisans continue to face significant challenges. Issues such as intense market competition, lack of direct access to consumers, and exploitation by intermediaries hinder their economic progress. As a result, many craftspeople struggle to secure a fair livelihood. This paper assesses, through two different case studies, the factors threatening the survival of traditional crafts and its economic, environmental, and social impact. Some solutions and policy interventions are also discussed that can support the survival and growth of the sector.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

NAME	AUTHOR AND DATE	KEY FINDING
National Handicrafts Policy Report	April 2017 AIACA (All India Artisans & Craftworkers Welfare Association)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Indian handicrafts sector is highly unorganized with limited data and formal recognition.</li> <li>• Artisans struggle with access to markets, finance, raw materials, and design innovation.</li> <li>• Lack of national branding and targeted policy support restricts the sector's growth and global reach.</li> </ul>
Handicraft Sector of India: Overview of Production & Export	Periodico di Mineralogia  Nov 2024	<p>Indian handicraft output more than doubled since 2007, with ~25 % CAGR by 2021–22.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exports have surged however remain volatile. Domestic consumption still significant (~40 %).</li> <li>• Growth hampered by weak institutional support, finance, tech, and market data.                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• USA is the main trading partner for India and this offers opportunity for exports and earning foreign currency</li> <li>• Even though women are a significant part of the rural handicraft industry, their wages are lower than male artisans.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Global Platforms Weaving into the Craft Industry	Christine Ithurbide  2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E-commerce giants like Amazon and Flipkart have partnered with Indian states to onboard artisans but often replicate old power structures.</li> <li>• Digital access and skills remain key barriers, especially in rural areas, limiting full participation of artisans.</li> <li>• Platforms offer visibility but shift business risks (e.g., inventory, logistics) onto artisans, becoming new intermediaries instead of removing them.</li> </ul>
Role of Traditional Crafts in Sustainable Development and Building Community Resilience: Case Stories from India	Arina Bardhan & Ananya Bhattacharya  2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case studies on Kantha and Madur crafts show how traditional practices promote sustainability and empower rural women.</li> <li>• Crafts contribute to SDGs by enabling circular economies, green livelihoods, and community resilience.</li> <li>• Market access, digital tools, and policy support are vital for scaling craft-based sustainability and safeguarding cultural heritage.</li> </ul>

<p>Design Interventions for the Sustainable Livelihood of the Bamboo Craft Community</p>	<p>Avinash Shende, Mandar Rane, Purba Josh 2023</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A participatory design project in Meghalaya standardized bamboo craft production without disrupting traditional skills. It shows that any supportive interventions should complement and respect traditional crafts and not displace them.</li> <li>• The intervention enhanced productivity, quality, and urban market access, empowering craftsmen with tools and entrepreneurial strategies.</li> <li>• The “Restricted Technological Intervention” (RTI) model demonstrated how modern design can bridge Indigenous Knowledge with sustainable entrepreneurship and help in further preserving our heritage and promoting local livelihoods.</li> </ul>
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**DATA AND METHOD**

For this analysis, I am using a case study approach by studying two different cases of handicraft products in India. These have been selected to understand challenges from across regions and product types. Each has been assessed on three key factors- *Economic, Social, and Environmental*.

**Case Study 1**

Handicraft Toys: Wooden toys from Sawantwadi in Maharashtra and Channapatna toys from Karnataka.

*Economic:* Artisans have been facing declining income due to competition from cheap, mass-produced (especially Chinese) toys whereas traditional toy-making is labour-intensive and costly. Declining or endangered availability of Pangara trees, rising costs of inputs, and poor road connectivity add to the problem. For Channapatna toys, COVID-19 disrupted home-based production, and a new highway bypass reduced traveler footfall to village areas.

*Social:* There is loss of generational interest as young people are leaving for better-paying jobs. Training efforts are sporadic, with little formal support from government or institutions. Despite modernization, limited profitability and market exposure continue to dissuade younger generations. Hence, the community’s cultural identity tied to the toy craft is weakening rapidly.

*Environmental:* The craft traditionally uses eco-friendly woods (Pongamia, mango) and natural dyes. Channapatna toys are crafted from local ivory wood and coloured with natural lac and vegetable dyes (turmeric, indigo), ensuring they're non-toxic and biodegradable. However, deforestation has reduced access to native woods, forcing artisans to use invasive alternatives. This creates the risk of environmental imbalance due to unsustainable wood sourcing.

Various support measures can help the the industry. Government support such as infrastructure (transport connectivity), artisanal skill training programs, forest management can play an important role. For instance, planning enabling infrastructure such as highway accessible artisan commercial zones can improve customer base. Similarly, this craft dates back to Tipu Sultan's era (~18th century) and is protected under GI status. Recent GI tag granted to Sawantwadi toys together with digital/ online sale platform can boost the industry. Skills are often passed through family lines and traditional apprenticeships and programs that incorporate such social factors can be helpful. Social enterprises like Varnam actively involve women artisans, while collaborations with design schools (e.g., NIFT, NID) are fostering novel toy designs and creating fresh opportunities. Further, promoting and setting artisan cooperatives to organise them can provide support and help to grow the industry.

## **Case Study 2**

### **Bamboo Furniture**

*Economic:* Cost-effective bamboo furniture can serve rising demand for sustainable materials. But its growth is restricted by poor infrastructure and outdated forest laws. Bamboo weaving in furniture offers low industrialization barriers and value-added potential, encouraging small-scale producer involvement. Bamboo holds immense employment potential, estimated to employ up to 10 million people annually in India alone.

*Social:* Traditional knowledge and construction techniques using bamboo are integral to many indigenous communities and can be revived to preserve cultural heritage. Social stigmas, where bamboo is seen as "poor man's timber," hinder its mainstream acceptability. Awareness and readiness to adopt bamboo in the furniture sector are low as cultural perceptions continue to favor traditional timber.

*Environmental:* Bamboo absorbs high amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> and prevents soil erosion due to deep roots. It is biodegradable and requires low energy inputs during processing, making it highly eco-friendly. Bamboo is a fast-growing resource, making its woven furniture more eco-friendly than timber options. However, limited technical development in processing may reduce some ecological advantages unless optimized. Also, it faces challenges such as limited seed reproduction, and the need for eco-safe preservation methods.

Given the state of challenges on one hand and potential of the bamboo industry on the other, some solutions to support the sector are discussed. On the production side, updating forest laws to ease bamboo harvesting and transport will help in consistent supply of inputs for bamboo artisans. To boost artisan revenue, setting up local bamboo processing units can bring greater value-add from the activities. Further, complementing this training of artisans with modern

techniques and design knowledge as well as providing them financial support through subsidies, credit and capital investment can be useful. On the demand side, there is a need to increase awareness. For this promoting bamboo as an eco friendly durable product would play an important role to attract increasingly environment conscious consumers. Similarly, using GI tags, eco-friendly labels, and strong branding can boost market value by enhancing product authenticity, consumer trust, and premium positioning in both domestic and international markets. Finally, making use of e-commerce platforms can enable artisans to sell directly to customers, eliminating middlemen, expanding their reach, and significantly increasing their profit margins.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study demonstrates that India's handicraft sector holds potential to foster inclusive, sustainable growth. However, it is currently underutilised due to gaps in infrastructure, outdated laws, and limited access to markets. Through case studies on wooden toys and bamboo furniture, the research shows how combining traditional knowledge with targeted policy interventions like forest reforms, artisan cooperatives, branding, and e-commerce access can foster livelihoods while preserving ecological and cultural integrity. To revive the craft economy, there must be a collaborative push from governments, private sectors, and communities toward equitable support systems that empower artisans economically, socially, and environmental.

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