



## Colonial and Post-Colonial Impact on Indian Artisans: A Case Study of Odisha and West Bengal

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### **Abstract**

Artisans have been the backbone of India's culture and heritage for centuries. However, they have continued to face exploitation, even to this day. This research article aims to raise awareness about their situation and substantiate it through surveys, secondary data, and analysis, drawing upon both historical accounts and contemporary field studies. It provides a detailed and comprehensive study on the socio-economic factors influencing the livelihoods of these craftsmen. During the colonial period, the British adopted several protectionist policies, which led to a decline in Indian artisanry. Many people were compelled to switch occupations due to the hardships of this work, resulting in a loss of skills and traditions that formed part of India's intangible heritage. The struggle of these craftsmen continues today, as they suffer from low incomes, limited recognition, and rising costs. With increasing modernization and the growth of e-commerce platforms, there is a pressing need for artisans to adapt to new technologies. Interviews have been conducted in Odisha and West Bengal to address the challenges of these craftsmen. Results highlight the urgent need for government action to support these vulnerable artisan clusters and sustainable interventions to safeguard India's artisanal heritage for future generations.

**Keywords:** *Artisans; Handicrafts; Colonial Rule; Odisha; West Bengal*

### **Introduction**

In India, art has always been intrinsically linked to nature, with material such as bamboo from the Northeast or moist clay from Yamuna riverbanks are used to make utensils. Artisans often revere nature, believing it to be infused with divine presence. India's long artistic tradition stretches from the Indus Valley Civilization to colonial period, encompassing a wide range of regional art forms. Stylised folk painting in Bihar, moonj baskets in Uttar Pradesh, dhokra art and pattachitra in Odisha, terracotta in West Bengal, fine textiles from Jammu and Kashmir, mulberry silk in Assam, patan patola designs of Gujarat, and blue pottery of Rajasthan are among the many intricate art forms practiced across the country. These

art forms not only have economic but also cultural significance. Handcrafted objects, often sold as souvenirs, shape the perception of visitors and pilgrims, while sacred crafts such as dhokra, pattachitra paintings, and terracotta, continue to produce ritual figures of deities worshipped by communities across India.

During the colonial period, Indian artisans faced immense challenges as they struggled to compete with British producers of handicrafts, goods and commodities. Protectionist policies imposed by the colonial administration restricted the growth of indigenous markets and led to the decline of local industries. This coupled with the erosion of traditional systems of royal patronage, left artisans in a vulnerable position both during and after the colonial rule. Even in the post-independence period, modernisation, industrial and declining demand for handmade products continues to threaten the survival of India's handicraft traditions.

Odisha (previously referred to as Orissa) and Bengal are two states in India which are most known for their diversity in art and crafts. Kolkata (previously referred to as Calcutta), which served as the capital of British India between 1772 and 1911, holds particular historical significance in understanding the trajectory of handicrafts during colonial rule. Reflecting back in pages of Indian history, Odisha had been the cultural hub of several crafts (Odiasamaj, 2025). Roots of artforms like filigree, pipli, pattachitra and dhokra extend beyond several generations making it significant traditionally. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to firstly, examine the economic and social impact of British colonialism on the handicrafts of Bengal and Odisha, including the effects of 'protectionist' (Shahabuddin, 2018: 1) trade policies, the decline of royal patronage systems, de-industrialization, and changes in the social status of artisans. Protectionist policies were undertaken by the British in India to eliminate all competition in the handicraft sector. Secondly, the paper explores the post-colonial context by focussing on the livelihood of artisans today, in terms of their income, modes of selling products, challenges faced, government support received, and the role of education in shaping the future of handicrafts. Through this inquiry, the paper also seeks to explore the willingness of younger generations to sustain these traditions, raising important questions about the continuity and preservation of artisanal legacy across these two critical sites.

### ***Literature Review***

The history of handicrafts can be traced back 5000 years ago, starting with the Indus Valley Civilization, which was known for pottery, metalwork and jewellery. Throughout the Vedic, Mauryan, Gupta, and Medieval periods, crafts like woodwork, metalwork, textiles and stone work developed under the royal patronage (Khatun, 2024). Monarchs and financial elites provided financial support to artisans allowing several artforms to flourish. However, during the colonial period, Indian textile and handicraft industries declined rapidly as a result of colonial protectionist policies. For example, the Calico acts of the 1700s aimed to protect the British textile industries at the expense of India's dominance in the global market (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). This came to be known as 'de-industrialization', which was supported by nationalists like economist R.C. Dutta (Meena, 2010). Indian handicrafts, made by traditional methods, could not compete against steam-powered and technologically advanced machine-made goods and were soon replaced by cheaper and mass-produced textiles produced in British factories. Additionally, the imposition of high tariffs on imports further threatened indigenous manufacturers.

“By the Act 11 and 12 William III, it was enacted that the wearing of wrought silks and of printed or dyed calicoes from India, Persia and China should be prohibited, and a penalty of £200 imposed on all persons having or selling the same.” (Meena, 2010: 57). With an aim of protecting British textile industries, this law led to further reductions in demand for Indian textiles and handicrafts. “While India produced about 25 percent of world industrial output in 1750, this figure had fallen to only 2 percent by

1900” (Clingsmith & Williamson, 2004: 1). This sharp decline was a clear reflection of the various colonial protectionist policies that adversely impacted traditional handicraft sector and the Indian economy. Several traditional artisanal communities were displaced by de-industrialisation, often compelled to migrate in hope of newer markets and higher demand for their goods (Haynes & Roy, 1999). Soon, artisans began losing their livelihoods as local markets declined; this eventually resulted in a loss of artistic expression and cultural identity and heritage as artisans eventually stopped producing handmade products and sought other financially rewarding occupations.

Traditionally, handicrafts were closely associated with specific communities, with specialised skills and techniques passed down across generations. However, colonial policies forced many artisans to abandon their crafts and turn to agriculture, which was largely manual in nature and required no specialised expertise. Soon, skilled artisans became peasants, leading to an intergenerational loss of artisanal knowledge and weakening of social integration. This transformation also had significant economic consequences, as handicrafts had long contributed to India’s economy (Chauhan, 2023). Some scholars, however, contest the extent of this decline; American economic historian Morris D. Morris (Meena, 2010) believed that “de-industrialization was a myth” (Meena, 2010: 56), and argued that such a process did not occur in the 19th century.

Beyond the debates on de-industrialisation, the end of royal patronage further eroded artisanal livelihoods by cutting off critical sources of financial support. The handicraft sector also faced additional challenges like the lack of proper infrastructure, limited capital, and reliance on outdated tools. In the post-colonial period, the situation of artisans remained precarious; revenues from handicrafts failed to meet expectations, and very few significant structural improvements materialised. As India modernised, artisans faced mounting challenges in preserving the cultural and historical significance of their crafts.

Contemporary difficulties for this sector are compounded by the lack of innovation, weak design, and limited technological advancement, all of which contributed to a steady decline in demand for handicrafts (Maitra, 2010). Rural artisans, in particular, struggle to access expanding markets, especially the newly developed space of e-commerce, due to high logistical costs, low levels of digital literacy and market knowledge, which place them at a significantly disadvantaged position in the market. Artisans also face challenges like copyright protection for their unique designs, as artisans lack the resource or knowledge required for safeguarding their distinctive crafts and prevent its replication by larger companies or organizations.

Together, these issues underscore the persistence of economic, social, and technological barriers that continue to threaten the sustainability of India’s handicraft sector.

## **Economic and Social Continuity of Impact**

Artisans are known for their unwavering craftsmanship, quality of design, visual perception of colour and aesthetics. Yet, at present, many traditional artisans lead insecure and disadvantaged lives. As per latest state government record, approximately 79% of the craftsmen in Bengal belong to marginalized communities, such as the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (West Bengal Artisan Portal, 2025). Furthermore, a large portion of them remain wage-dependent and face significant barriers, including lack of access to modern technical equipment, education, and training. Artisans argue that geographical distance from raw material sources and market outlets have resulted in a rise of middlemen, making it difficult for them to earn profits. Limited awareness of government policies and private sector initiatives aimed to safeguard traditional crafts has given rise to further marginalisation in their community.

West Bengal and Odisha have historically been pivotal centres for handicrafts, but the artisans are struggling to carry forward the legacy of their craft. For example, it has been noted that several dhokra

artisans in Bankura district of West Bengal had been living in terrible conditions. They have been forced to leave their crafts and migrate for wage-based employment in cities (Sen, 2024). In Odisha, the handicraft sector has gone through massive changes. There have been a rise in the rates of unemployment and a decline in the export of crafts (Rout, 2021). Crafts like embroidery and wooden crafts are seeing a falling potential leading to concerns over its inheritance and legacy (Khatun, 2024).

Over the years, several handmade sectors have adapted to changing demand for goods and services. The innovation of E-commerce platforms has made it easier for several small businesses and artist clusters to flourish and sell their products to customers. However, artisans who lack digital competence have struggled to find sufficient customers and create a market for their goods. Changing consumer preferences from basic needs to mass produced goods in the 1900s have decreased the demand for handmade goods (Jain, 2023). Consumers are primarily attracted to goods which are in fashion rather than traditional classic objects. Moreover, mass produced goods are cheaper priced than handmade ones, and with artisans unable to produce on a large-scale, rising costs render them at a competitive disadvantage.

Additionally, there has been a downward trend in the intergenerational skill transmission among artisans. This is particularly due to the education system which focusses more on development of professional careers rather than traditional artforms and their conservation. The younger generation today lacks interest in learning traditional skills needed to produce diverse artforms and instead wants to pursue modern careers with higher prospects of income and economic mobility. Although national and state governments are trying to implement several schemes to support artisan clusters financially, and to provide insights on effective marketing methods, skill development and access to modern technology continues to pose a substantial challenge.

## ***Research Methodology***

This research paper primarily adopts a qualitative methodology with an investigative and explanatory approach. Data collection combined both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured surveys and in-depth interviews conducted among artisans and their communities in rural and urban areas of Odisha and West Bengal. This method enabled documentation of lived experiences of craftsmen and provided insights into their socio-economic conditions, occupational challenges, and coping strategies.

Secondary data was drawn from a wide range of sources, including research articles, books, and policy documents. This material was used to contextualise the findings within broader historical and economic debates on colonial and post-colonial India. Using both primary and secondary sources, the paper examines various themes impacting the lives of artisans, including the economic and social impacts of colonialism, post-colonial traditions, and the current challenges of modernisation and globalisation. The method highlights the paradox of artisanal lives – despite being the contributors of an intangible heritage, craftsmen occupy some of the most marginalised positions in Indian society.

## **Colonial Impact on Handicrafts**

During colonial era, handicrafts were either sold as services or as commodities. The Indian economy relied highly on handicrafts and was involved in a large-scale production of cotton and silk fabrics, sugar, jute, dyestuffs, mineral and metallic products like arms, metal wares and oil. The establishment of British rule had a direct impact on the existence of handicrafts. The demand for handicrafts almost disappeared following the perishing of noble courts and the industry needed a new source of demand from the Europeans. Indian textiles were extremely famous in the West, with chintz, muslin, and calico being highly demanded for their high quality and intricate designs. Towns like Dacca

and Murshidabad in Bengal, were thriving centres of textile industry. As a result, India's textile imports into Britain rose sharply. However, rather than celebrating India's textile dominance, it marked the beginning of the exploitation of Indian workmanship. Popular and aesthetic local handicrafts of Odisha like applique, filigree and tribal arts found their way into the British market as well. However, Indian manufacturers were subject to high taxes, yet British goods were sold duty-free. This limited their imports into Britain while at the same time local artisans experienced significant competition from the British industries established in India. Thereby, the population of craftsmen declined rapidly in the 18th and 19th centuries. Official records of such British discriminatory policies further fortify this statement.

## ***Research Findings***

This section will primarily focus on the artisans in Odisha and Bengal, specifically examining the different crafts they practice, the challenges they face, skills required, and their social recognition. Each of the states have been addressed as separate case studies. While artisans of various artforms have been interviewed, the primary findings are related to the economic status of artisans, cultural significance of the crafts, government support, legacy and future outlook of the handicrafts.

## **Handicrafts in Odisha**

Odisha has been a leading state in terms of handicrafts in India. Apart from contributing towards the state's cultural heritage, handicrafts are also a source of livelihood for craftspeople. A survey conducted among artisans of Odisha provided an understanding on their social and economic status in the colonial era and the present day. Artisans specialising in different kinds of art forms were interviewed primarily from the Mayurbhanj district in Odisha. During the colonial time, revenues were insufficient and working conditions were terrible due to various colonial policies. Even today, several artisans struggle in Odisha due to insufficient revenue, recognition and awareness. People are not aware of the main working hand behind these intricate and aesthetic crafts. One particular reason being middleman exploitation. It's important to bring these artisans to the forefront in order to give them recognition and credit. The lineage of these crafts is coming to an end due to several struggles associated with the occupation. Several initiatives have been introduced by the Indian government to conserve these artforms, despite which the disparity and struggle among craftsmen continues. Following current day observations have been made on craftsmen of Odisha.

## **Variation in Crafts and Artisan Experiences**

This study interviewed artisans practicing different types of crafts such as terracotta, stone art, dhokra craft, cement pottery, bamboo craft, clay sculpturing, and mud pottery. The names of the participating artists have been included with their consent. Terracotta, a clay-based art having a rich heritage dating back to the Indus Valley civilization, is practiced by Kedarnath Sahu. Stone artist Baikunth Shah specialises in sculpting using a special stone called black granite, crafting statues of deities and human figures. Dhokra artist Prosanto Rana specializes in crafting different sculptures and objects through the lost-wax casting technique. Cement pottery which involves the use of cement, diesel, powder and other materials to produce various items like pots is practiced by Tasleem Ali. Bamboo craft which makes use of bamboos to make everyday objects like baskets, brooms and bags, is perfected by Ranjit Behera. Clay sculpting which includes the use of a special type of clay to make statues of deities, is excelled in by Sanjay Mudli. Lastly, mud pottery which entails shaping clay to create durable daily use items like pots, is practiced by Devandra Raudo.



Figure 1: Devandra Raudo shaping clay in a potter's wheel in Mayurbhanj, Odisha  
Source: Author's own photograph, May 2025.

Majority of the artisans had several years of experience in the handicraft sector. For instance, an artisan named Prosanto Rana had been pursuing Dhokra art for the past thirty years, while another artisan named Devendra Raudo involved in mud pottery had been working for the past forty-five years. Six of these artisans belong to families where the craft had been practiced and passed down for several generations with some even dating long before the colonial period.

### **Livelihood and Income Stability**

Most of the artisans struggle to generate a fair revenue to live a comfortable life. The absence of fair pricing for their highly skilled products leads to further income instability. Trade of handicrafts is their main occupation to earn a living. One of the artisans Prosanto states that,

“I make a living, eat food, educate my children and if I have to give gifts to anyone, I do so through the income generated by selling dhokra art.”

Prosanto is not able to sell crafts directly to customers as he lives in a rural village named Kuliana in the Mayurbhanj district. Lack of awareness about his work means that he has to sell his crafts to middlemen who buy his products at extremely cheap prices leaving him with almost no profits. Following lockdown, the demand for his products almost perished leaving him with almost no income. Kedarnath, another artisan pointed out that due to underdevelopment, people are unaware of his products. If the area becomes a proper town, then he believes that he can earn high revenues. One of the artisans stated that he often has to migrate to other areas if his products are not meeting customers in that region. Due to low incomes some of them think that they may change their work in the future highlighting the fact that the legacy of crafts is in danger. This suggests the urgent need of action from the government, awareness and acknowledgement for these artisans.

### **Identity & Cultural Value and Government Support**

All the interviewed artisans feel gratified in their traditions. Six out of seven of them are from families with expertise in the craft for generations. Most of them are highly regarded in their communities and are not discriminated against in any way. In Prosanto's family, dhokra has been a tradition passed down seven generations. Everyone loves his craftsmanship in his society. Baikunth Shah and Sanjay Mudli are involved with sculpting of deities and religious figures using stone and clay respectively. These sculptures are extremely important from the cultural point of view highlighting their strong religious beliefs and traditions. However, the main masterminds of these beautiful and aesthetic crafts are not brought to the forefront. Lack of recognition is primarily because their products find a way into the market outlets through middlemen. The lack of credibility greatly affects their identity as craftsmen.

Overall, mixed responses have been received from artisans regarding government policies and initiatives. Some of the artisans say that they have benefited from government schemes. While others feel that they are excluded from central policies and that the government should introduce subsidies and more initiatives so that the lineage of their crafts can continue. Prosanto states that,

“The government does not support us, if they would have done so, we would have been very prominent people by now. They don't give us loans when we go and ask for them.”

Prosanto wants the government to remove the middlemen and provide market outlets for his products so that customers directly purchase them from him. He also wants his story to be pushed forward by the government so that artisans can be uplifted in the society. In addition, Kedarnath who practices terracotta states that there is no facility for proper roads in his region. He wants the government to develop the rural regions into towns so that there is increased demand for his handicraft. He also wants the government to provide certain facilities to reduce his costs of production. On the other hand, Devandra pointed out that, “The government gives us rice; hence we are able to fill our stomachs.” These hybrid responses received from various artisans helps us understand their current situation and expectations from the government. Immediate attention is required in the form of initiatives by the government to address challenges faced by artisans like income instability, middleman exploitation and insufficient recognition.

### **Adaptation and Innovation**

Some artisans find it difficult to adapt to the changing demand and market. While the younger artisans are adjusting to the increasingly growing digital and urban outlets. Many of them are not able to meet the personalized demands of customers as they are used to producing their own traditional craft items. Artisans are also trying to adapt to the rising use of machinery and technology in the handicraft sector. Prosanto says,

“ Dhokra artisans make their craft around a certain pattern.”

He adds that they can't make new designs given to them which he cites as a challenge that he would like to overcome. Earlier dhokra crafts used to be polished using a lemon and toothbrush but now their family uses a machine to do the same. Terracotta artisan Kedarnath Sahu says,

“In the past, clay was used for making pots, food and water utensils. Now it's used for decorating houses and gardens. Even toys and other essential items can be made from clay.”

He also explains how terracotta is adapting to a world of technology, stating that earlier terracotta was carried out manually and now those who use machinery have lower costs giving them a competitive advantage.



Figure 2: Prosanto Rana creating dhokra artifacts, in Kuliana, Mayurbhanj, Odisha.  
Source: Author's own photograph, September 2025

## Skill Transmission and Future Outlook

Overall, it has been found that the lineage of different crafts in Odisha show a decline. Younger generations are unwilling to continue with the handicraft sector due to income instability, falling demand and availability of other jobs. Artisans want their children to prioritise education before work. Prosanto says,

“My children do not want to continue with dhokra, due to low income generated from it.”

Kedarnath shares an opposing view. He believes that a lot of young people are moving away from this craft (Terracotta). However, he wants his children to be educated properly first and then continue the lineage of this handicraft. Some craftsmen want their children to do some other work due to the intense manual labour involved in the handicraft sector. Devandra says that the legacy of mud pottery will come to an end in his family after him as the specific type of clay used in the craft is very difficult to get. While Tasleem says that he wants to leave this work and start a new life. Hence, the lineage of handicrafts is in danger as most of the artisans do not want their future generations to suffer due to the challenges involved with this skilled work.

## Artisans of West Bengal

Durga Puja is among the most magnificent festivals celebrated in West Bengal. The celebration circles around pandals, theme-based temporary structures displaying several artistic and cultural messages. Idols of Goddess Durga are creatively showcased in these artistic stations. During this festive season, several artisans specialising in sculpting and ornamentation of deities were interviewed in Kolkata, the city of joy in West Bengal. Artisans hold deep faith in Goddess Durga and express their devotion through idol worship. The craft practiced by these artisans is seasonal as the festival's

preparation spans over three months only. The survey gave us an insight into the difficult lives of these craftsmen who struggle to make a living. It also gave us an outlook on their economic circumstances, skill transmission and future legacy. Initiatives need to be introduced for the conservation of this craft which symbolises Bengal's rich cultural heritage.

### **Variation in Crafts and Artisan Experiences**

Several artisans practicing two main craft types relating to Durga Puja were interviewed. The crafts were ornamentation and sculpting of the idols of goddess Durga. Ornamentation involves making decorative items to embellish the holy statues of goddess Durga. Three artisans surveyed—Jaydev Purnima, Gautam Das, and one who preferred to remain anonymous—have mastered this craft, though each specializes in creating distinct types of ornaments for the festival. Sculpting, on the other hand involves the use of a special type of clay, hay, bamboo, mud, colours and various other materials depending on the artisan and theme. Six different skilled sculptors were interviewed: Santu pal, Nabo Kumar Pal, Madhav Bhaskar, Bhola, Rahul Pal and Anup Chitrakar. While their work centred on representations of Goddess Durga, they employed diverse techniques in idol construction. All the names of artists have been mentioned after taking consent from them.



Figure 3: Bhola sculpting a clay idol of goddess Durga in Kalighat, Kolkata  
Source: Author's own photograph, September 2025

Many of the artisans have immense experience in the handicraft sector and have been practicing the artform for years. In particular, Nabo Kumar Pal has been pursuing the craft of sculpting approximately for the past thirty years while Madhav Bhaskar has an experience of twenty-nine years. Some of the craftsmen are from families where artisanry has been passed down several generations while some have started the tradition in their families.

### **Livelihood and Income Stability**

Many artisans struggle to raise sufficient revenue in order to live a comfortable life. However, some of them are satisfied with their income. The crafts practiced by artisans are their main source of income and hence they depend on it for a livelihood. Since the craft is seasonal, their income tends to vary throughout the year with maximum revenue in the Durga Puja season. Almost all artisans sell their products directly to customers, and not through middlemen. A skilled craftsman, Santu pal reports making around ₹13,000 per month, an amount that has increased over the past 20 years compared to earlier times. Santu pal explains that he sells his products directly to the public. His sales can range from ₹10,000 to

₹40,000, depending on the season and demand. Another artisan Jaydev Purnima states his monthly income is around ₹10000 - ₹12000. He says,

“Earlier the price of raw materials was lower, but now the cost of raw materials has gone up.”

This has led to a decline in his earnings over the years. On the other hand, Nabo Kumar Pal says,

“My monthly income varies as it is a seasonal craft. Sometimes I earn as much as lakhs while other times, it may drop to around ₹50,000.”

His income has increased over the years, and he sells his products directly to customers, without involving middlemen. When asked about problems, he clarifies that there are no problems, only challenges. Another artisan shares his income to be around ₹30000 which has increased over the years. Thus, the incomes of different artisans are distinct. Some of them generate enough revenue while others struggle to make a living.

### **Identity and Cultural Value and Government Support**

Sculpting and ornamentation of idols of goddess Durga holds great cultural value for artisans. They worship the deity and hence the artform holds great reverence among them. Almost all artisans are respected in their societies and are not subjected to prejudice. Some of them are from families where the artform has been in their lineage. For instance, Nabo Kumar Pal shares that his occupation has deep roots in his family, as it has been practiced for four generations, and his entire family grew up in this tradition. Moreover, he is also respected in his community, and everyone likes his work. Another artisan Rahul Pal states that the craft of sculpting has been in his family for generations—his father and grandfather were also engaged in the same work. Currently, he continues the family tradition and his family lives with him near the workplace. On the other hand, Gautam Das, a craftsman who practices ornamentation clarifies that the artform has not been a tradition in his family. Regarding social recognition, he explains that those who understand his work respect him, while those who do not understand it fail to appreciate its value. Craftsmen see their work as a source of recognition for themselves. The craft shapes their cultural identity and for some it connects them to their ancestors, but this often does not match the hardships and low revenue.

Artisans feel abandoned by the government with several promises made but no real help. They have lost all their faith and find themselves alone in the struggle without any support. The absence of financial or policy support makes the survival of the craft very difficult. For example, when asked about government support, Anup Chitrakar responds with a firm ‘no’ indicating that they receive no assistance. He says that he does need assistance, specifically requesting financial support. Another craftsman, Madhav Bhaskar responds pessimistically when asked about government support. He insists that he will not receive any support from the government, dismissing the possibility of aid. He recounts a frustrating anecdote, saying,

“Initially, the government had promised to make a house for us but it has not been finished till now. They have left it incomplete.”

Along with this, he received no financial aid in form of loan or reward. Moreover, another artisan who chose to be anonymous, is critical of the government, saying that instead of providing help, the government gives him more problems. He believes the authorities do not work for him or support artisans like him. There are no policies or schemes in place that can help him. Gautam Das who practices ornamentation also stresses that he needs a lot of government support, as his work is seasonal. Artisans like him do not have work throughout the year, and sometimes not even every year. He highlights that recent bans on thermocol (expanded polystyrene) have further hurt their livelihood, as it limits the

materials they can use. This has made their situation more difficult, leaving them in a vulnerable position. Craftsmen are struggling to continue with their occupation, due to lack of assistance from the government. Many artisans are moving away from the craft which poses a threat to Bengal's cultural heritage.

## Adaptation and Innovation

In West Bengal, Durga Puja is celebrated in pandals with various unique themes. Craftsmen often have to design idols on the basis of the orders and themes of pandals. Moreover, as the world is progressing ahead with high technological advancements, artisans have adapted to use machines for certain aspects. But certain craftsmen refrain from using them. For instance, Nabo Kumar Pal emphasizes that he does not use any machines in the creation process—everything is done by hand, keeping the work traditional. For him, every challenge lies in creating new and creative works, which he considers enjoyable rather than burdensome. Moreover, Gautam Das also shares that all his work is done manually with no machine involvement. On the other hand, Rahul Pal, unlike many traditional craftsmen does use some machines, specifically a spray machine for painting the idols. He shares that, nowadays, themes have been introduced for pandals and hence they make idols related to specific themes. Craftpeople are slowly adapting to changing consumer tastes and themes, along with a slight increase in the use of machinery.



Figure 4: Gautam Das crafting ornaments for goddess Durga in Kumartuli, Kolkata

Source: Author's own photograph, September 2025

## Skill Transmission and Future Outlook

The younger generation is moving away from their culture and traditions due to the availability of more lucrative jobs in the urban markets, change in interests and struggles involved with the craft. Although artisans want their future generations to continue the lineage of the crafts, the hard work and physical labour involved makes them reconsider their path. Some craftsmen want their children to follow and learn what they like. For example, Nabo Kumar Pal shares that he has two daughters. He adds by saying,

“Whether they study or pursue other paths will depend on their own interests.”

Moreover, according to Gautam, the younger generation has many options today with phone in their hands. While some youth still engage in this craft, many are drawn to modern opportunities instead. When asked if he wants his children to follow the same profession, Gautam responds openly. He says his son may pursue this craft if he wishes, but if he chooses a different path, that too is acceptable. Citing Aamir Khan's famous words, he stresses that one should do what they want and not be forced into a career. Another craftsman, Santu Pal expresses a clear wish to continue his work. However, he acknowledges that his children do not practice this craft, indicating that the generational transfer of knowledge is breaking. Meanwhile Rahul Pal feels that his children should know about this traditional art, regardless of whether they choose to continue it. However, he admits that the younger generation is not actively pursuing this work, even though he believes they should. Thereby, the younger generation is largely not interested in contributing towards West Bengal's intangible heritage. Many do not want their children to suffer in the same work, given the low assistance and support, making the future of the craft uncertain.

## ***Discussion***

During the colonial times, artisans struggled from a loss of patronage, colonial protectionist policies, unfair competition and lack of adaptation to advancing technologies. This pushed them towards poverty, and they contended to make a living. The continuity of this impact extends to the present day. Today, artisans struggle from income instability, middleman exploitation and lack of government support. However, the causes have changed over time. Earlier, colonial policies were responsible for a decline in the handicraft industry but today ongoing modernisation and change in consumer tastes have led to marginalization of artisans. Although, they are slowly gaining social recognition, lack of awareness of available assistance seems to end the lineage of these crafts. Initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Vishwakarma and National Handicrafts Development Programme have been launched by the central government to preserve this invaluable heritage of India and uplift the situation of craftsmen. However, artisans are unaware of such schemes or programs and hence are not able to take their advantage. The cycle of insecurity and ongoing marginalisation persists due to a lack of direct access to these schemes. Relevant databases facilitating networking between key clusters and an easily accessible information podium could help bridge this gap (Das, 2015). Pradhan Mantri Vishwakarma is one of the policies uplifting handcrafters which was initiated by the Prime minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2023 (Government of India, 2024). Under this program, artisans belonging to any of the eighteen specific crafting occupations can benefit from training, loan support, marketing support and toolkit incentive. The eighteen traditional crafts recognised by the government include carpentry, boat making, armoury, blacksmithing (Lohar), hammer and tool kit making, locksmithing, goldsmithing (Sonar), pottery (Kumhaar), sculpture (Moortikar/stone carving), stone breaking, cobbling (Charmkar), masonry (Rajmistri), basketry/mat and broom making/coir weaving, doll and toy making, barbering (Naai), garland making (Malakaar), washing (Dhobi), tailoring (Darzi) and fishing net weaving. The program also grants them recognition as they receive a Pradhan Mantri Vishwakarma ID card and certificate, thereby helping with their socio-economic development. The main aim of the initiative is to encourage the growth of India's traditional handicrafts. In West Bengal, the government had extended support towards artisan clusters by introducing the 'West Bengal Artisans Financial Benefit Scheme 2024' (Government of West Bengal, 2024). The financial assistance aimed to create business opportunities, promote their economic stability and enable access to the now, digitised world. In Odisha, the government conducts several training programs to help with skill development, marketing and design development (Government of Odisha, 2025). The government also offers financial assistance and helps artisans reach a wider audience by giving them access to display their products at exhibitions and other fairs. Low digital literacy among artisans, is a major issue in a world where technology is booming. They may be used to old, traditional techniques of marketing which can limit their revenue. Use of social media platforms for marketing and advertising can attract more consumers, which could give a boost to their

profits. There have been a few private and government initiatives to educate craftsmen about digitisation and make them aware about e-commerce platforms which could expand their sales beyond customers visiting their stores, thereby possibly improving their economic situations. One such government initiative includes “Digital India” (Munda, 2024) to promote technological proficiency. Some individuals have introduced special portals for artisans to directly sell their goods. This eliminates the middleman and hence increases their profits. One such example of a portal is, “Alokya” (Munda, 2024). Other steps taken by the government in order to encourage participation in the handicraft sector include rewarding the artisan-champions at periodic intervals. This can help motivate the artisans to work hard, produce better quality products and come up with new innovations. Such recognition can strengthen the social and economic status of artisans. This can contribute to preserving traditional skills while adapting them to modern demands. While the effect of colonial exploitation and disempowerment continues till date to shape the lives of artisans, greater awareness about ongoing government policies, increased private initiatives from individuals or NGOs, direct access to support schemes and improved digital literacy can help improve the financial and working conditions of these craftsmen. India can protect its cultural identity and timeless heritage by empowering its talented artisans.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examines the conditions of artisans in India, with special emphasis on Odisha and West Bengal and also illustrates how colonial policies and socio-economic challenges continue to shape the lives of artisans. The main aim was to raise awareness about the decline of traditional crafts in India and their importance culturally. The paper demonstrates this through field surveys and secondary data. By linking the colonial time struggles to present day challenges like low incomes and modernization, the study explains the continuity of these barriers in the lives of craftsmen and stresses the importance to safeguard their legacy.

While the research was successful in capturing the main challenges, insights and thoughts of artisans, there are certain limitations which persist. The field surveys were confined to Odisha and West Bengal; hence all states were not covered. These two regions do not completely explain the diversity of crafts and the socio-economic situation of craftsmen in India. In addition, the interviews were conducted in limited geographical areas within the two states. The sample size was also small considering the huge population of craftsmen and artisanal clusters in India. Moreover, some government and institutional data on handicrafts were not accessible as a part of secondary research.

However, the paper holds significant value. Although only a limited geographical scope and population were covered, it is able to map the gaps in the challenges faced by craftsmen. It provides a historical analysis of the impact of colonial protectionist policies on the livelihoods of artisans and discusses the aftermath of de-industrialisation on the Indian economy. Moreover, it examines the effect of modernisation and stresses the importance of adapting to new technology as a solution to their economic challenges. Lastly, it reinforces the significance of artisans as contributors to India’s cultural and intangible heritage and emphasises the urgent need for policy interventions to secure their future.

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