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Indian Handicrafts as Living Symbols of Religious Traditions, Folk Culture, and Socio-Economic Identity

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ABSTRACT
Indian handicrafts operate at the intersection of material culture, religious and ritual practice, folk knowledge, regional identity, and livelihoods. This article examines these connections through a qualitative documentary analysis of published scholarship, official Indian government information, UNESCO intangible cultural heritage records, and industry data. Unlike a primary survey, the study does not collect responses from artisans or estimate statistical relationships between individual-level variables. Instead, it triangulates available secondary evidence and organises it into five themes: ritual use, folk-cultural knowledge, cultural identity and memory, socio-economic contribution, and cultural continuity under market change. Official sources report that 32.90 lakh artisans had been mobilised under the Pahchan initiative by 30 December 2024. The Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts reported handicraft exports rising from ₹30,019.24 crore in 2022–23 to ₹32,758.80 crore in 2023–24, an increase of 9.13% in rupee terms. UNESCO's record of the Thatheras of Jandiala Guru documents craft knowledge transmitted through practice and its use in everyday, wedding, and temple contexts. The documentary synthesis indicates that handicrafts should be understood as living heritage sustained by people, skills, rituals, and community knowledge—not merely as products. At the same time, export growth and artisan registration figures do not establish equitable income, secure employment, or the condition of every craft tradition. The article concludes that cultural safeguarding and economic development should be pursued together through artisan-centred design, fair value distribution, intergenerational skill transmission, responsible digital market access, and community participation in heritage decisions.
Keywords: Indian handicrafts; intangible cultural heritage; religious traditions; folk culture; cultural identity; artisan livelihoods; documentary analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian handicrafts are not simply decorative or utilitarian goods. They may carry religious meanings, embody local histories, express regional aesthetics, support customary ceremonies, and sustain livelihoods. A metal vessel may be used in a temple or wedding; a painted surface may narrate local stories; a woven or embroidered object may identify a region, community, or customary practice. The significance of these objects is neither universal nor static: it depends on how artisans, users, communities, institutions, and markets make and interpret them.

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage treats traditional craftsmanship as a domain of living heritage and emphasises safeguarding the knowledge and skills involved in making, rather than only preserving finished objects (UNESCO, 2003). India's Ministry of Culture similarly situates crafts within a broader landscape of intangible cultural heritage, including rituals, creative expression, and community traditions (Ministry of Culture, Government of India, n.d.). The UNESCO inscription of the traditional brass and copper utensil-making craft of the Thatheras of Jandiala Guru offers a specific illustration: craft knowledge is transmitted through practice and the products have both everyday and ritual uses, including in weddings and temples (UNESCO, 2014).

The sector also has economic significance. The Ministry of Textiles' Annual Report 2024–25 describes handicrafts as a source of employment, export earnings, and cultural preservation, while also acknowledging structural challenges associated with an unorganised sector, limited capital, uneven access to technology, and inadequate market intelligence (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2025). EPCH reported that handicraft exports, excluding hand-knotted carpets, increased by 9.13% in rupee terms during 2023–24 (Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts [EPCH], 2024). These figures demonstrate market scale and export activity, but they do not by themselves show whether benefits are fairly distributed among artisans.

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The objective of this article is to synthesise available secondary evidence on five interrelated dimensions: (1) religious and ritual significance; (2) folk culture and traditional knowledge; (3) cultural symbolism and identity; (4) socio-economic importance; and (5) continuity and transformation under modernization and commercialization. The study also develops managerial, practical, and policy implications for sustaining cultural meaning alongside viable livelihoods.

2. LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Handicrafts as living heritage and material culture

Heritage scholarship understands heritage as a social process through which communities interpret, transmit, and sometimes contest what is valued from the past (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). UNESCO's framework similarly directs attention to the skills and knowledge embedded in craft practice (UNESCO, 2003). Sennett (2008) and Ingold (2013) explain making as embodied knowledge learned through materials, repetition, observation, and practice. These perspectives imply that safeguarding a craft requires attention to artisans, learning environments, tools, raw materials, and community recognition—not only to finished objects.

Material-culture research describes how objects acquire changing meanings as they move between makers, households, rituals, museums, tourism, and markets (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). A craft product can therefore have multiple values at once: use value, exchange value, aesthetic value, social value, and ritual value. Commercial circulation may introduce new audiences and income opportunities, but can also change the contexts in which a craft is understood.

2.2 Religious and ritual significance

Craft objects can be used in worship, offerings, festivals, processions, marriage ceremonies, and other life-cycle events. Their ritual significance depends on community-specific practices and should not be assumed from appearance alone. The UNESCO documentation of Thathera metalwork records the use of handmade utensils for ritual and utilitarian purposes, including special occasions such as weddings and temple use (UNESCO, 2014). The case demonstrates that a craft's significance may be embedded in both the object and the production knowledge through which it is made.

Religious and ritual uses also create responsibilities for researchers, marketers, and heritage organisations. Sacred or restricted knowledge should not be commercialised without consent. Product development and promotion should distinguish between items intended for ritual use and products adapted for general decoration or tourism.

2.3 Folk culture, motifs, and traditional knowledge

Folk-cultural knowledge is expressed through motifs, colours, materials, techniques, narratives, legends, and customary methods. Much of this knowledge is transmitted informally within families, workshops, and community networks. It may be learned alongside technical skills rather than through formal instruction. The cultural biography of an object helps explain how its meanings are attached to production and use (Kopytoff, 1986). However, motifs and methods are not necessarily fixed: artisans reinterpret inherited forms in response to local changes, new buyers, material availability, and design collaboration.

2.4 Identity, memory, and belonging

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence; it is reproduced through representation, practice, memory, and social relationships (Hall, 1990). Craft traditions can provide visible markers of regional belonging and collective memory, while also reflecting internal diversity and change. The heritage label can create recognition and pride, but it may also simplify a community's history or privilege selected versions of tradition (Smith, 2006). A responsible account therefore recognises artisans as active interpreters of their heritage rather than passive custodians of an unchanging past.

2.5 Socio-economic importance and livelihoods

The sustainable-livelihood approach considers how people combine skills, resources, social relationships, institutions, and livelihood strategies under conditions of risk and change (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998). Bebbington (1999) connects assets with the capacity to make a living and pursue meaningful ways of being. For artisans, craft skills and cultural knowledge can be assets, but their value depends on access to materials, credit, fair markets, training, infrastructure, and bargaining power.

Research on Indian craft livelihoods has highlighted both cultural value and economic vulnerability. Deshmukh et al. (2024) examine sustainability and livelihood concerns among Dhokra artisans, while Venkatesh et al. (2024) discuss a sustainable-livelihood framework for small-scale handicraft producers. Such work supports an integrated perspective: cultural preservation cannot be separated from the material conditions that enable artisans to continue practising their craft.

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2.6 Modernization and commercialization

Markets can provide income, wider recognition, and incentives to continue a tradition. They may also encourage standardisation, rapid production, low-price competition, or changes in designs and materials. Throsby (2001) argues that cultural value cannot be reduced to market price, while Sen (1999) frames development in terms of expanding people's capabilities and choices. The relevant question is therefore not whether modernization is inherently good or bad, but whether artisans can shape change, receive fair value, and maintain meaningful cultural control.

3. METHODOLOGY: SECONDARY-DATA DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

This article uses qualitative documentary analysis with descriptive use of published administrative and industry statistics. It does not use a primary questionnaire, interviews, participant observation, or inferential statistical modelling. The unit of analysis is the document or published data item, not an individual artisan.

3.1 Sources and selection

The source base comprises: (a) official Government of India material, including Ministry of Textiles annual reporting, Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) scheme information, and Ministry of Culture heritage material; (b) UNESCO's Convention and India-related intangible cultural heritage records; (c) industry-level export statistics published by EPCH; and (d) peer-reviewed and foundational scholarly works on heritage, material culture, identity, livelihoods, and craft production. Sources were selected for direct relevance to the article's five themes, identifiable institutional or scholarly provenance, and availability of descriptive evidence.

This is a focused documentary synthesis, not a registered systematic review. It does not claim exhaustive coverage of all Indian craft traditions or all available publications. Official statistics are quoted with their reporting period and scope. Conceptual interpretations are distinguished from facts reported by sources. Where source material does not provide direct evidence—for example, household-level income distribution or the prevalence of particular ritual uses—the article does not infer a national estimate.

3.2 Analytical procedure

Documents were organised under five themes: ritual and religious use; folk knowledge and customary practice; identity and collective memory; livelihoods and market participation; and transformation and safeguarding. A thematic synthesis was then used to compare the claims and evidence across official records, industry statistics, and scholarly literature. Descriptive figures are reproduced from their original sources; no new statistical test, correlation, regression, or causal estimate was calculated. The export percentage reported below is the EPCH's published year-on-year comparison, not a result independently estimated from artisan-level data.

3.3 Reliability and limitations of secondary evidence

Official records are useful for programme reach and administrative reporting but may not measure the quality or distribution of benefits. Export statistics describe aggregate trade, not individual artisan earnings, working conditions, or cultural continuity. Heritage nominations provide rich contextual information but often focus on selected traditions and safeguarding narratives. Academic studies may be geographically or craft-specific. Triangulation helps compare these evidence types, but it cannot eliminate gaps in the available data.

4. FINDINGS FROM SECONDARY EVIDENCE

4.1 Handicrafts function as ritual objects and living knowledge

A clear documentary finding is that some Indian crafts are embedded in ritual and community life rather than being exclusively commercial goods. UNESCO's Thathera case documents handmade brass and copper utensils used for everyday purposes and special occasions, including weddings and temples. It also describes the craft as connected to family and kinship structures, work ethic, and social status in the town (UNESCO, 2014). This example supports the interpretation that the cultural significance of a craft may reside in its technique, customary use, and social organisation as well as in the finished utensil.

The evidence is illustrative rather than nationally representative. It should not be generalised to every Indian craft or religious community. Nonetheless, it demonstrates why heritage documentation and product development should record customary context and community perspectives instead of treating all handmade objects as interchangeable lifestyle products.

4.2 Folk-cultural knowledge is transmitted through practice

The UNESCO framework defines traditional craftsmanship as a domain in which the knowledge and skills involved in making are central to safeguarding (UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO, n.d.-a). The Thathera record likewise

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describes knowledge transmitted orally and through the craft process (UNESCO, 2014). Together with scholarship on embodied making (Ingold, 2013; Sennett, 2008), this suggests that continuity depends on opportunities for apprenticeship, practice, access to tools and materials, and interaction between experienced artisans and learners. A practical implication is that documenting designs alone is insufficient. Documentation should also capture terminology, material selection, preparation, tool use, sequencing, finishing, customary meanings, and the conditions under which knowledge is shared—subject to community consent and restrictions.

4.3 Crafts communicate identity, but identity remains dynamic

The literature indicates that craft objects can act as carriers of collective memory and markers of place, but meanings are socially negotiated rather than permanently fixed (Hall, 1990; Smith, 2006). A craft may represent a community's history while also changing in response to new buyers, design partnerships, or altered lifestyles. The documentary evidence therefore supports a dynamic view of cultural identity: continuity can involve selective adaptation rather than exact repetition.

The evidence base is stronger for the conceptual importance of identity than for a national estimate of how strongly artisans identify with specific crafts. Because the selected sources do not provide a common comparable identity measure across craft clusters, this article does not assign a numerical score to cultural identity or claim that one craft is more authentic than another.

4.4 Administrative reach and export performance indicate scale, not equitable outcomes

The Ministry of Textiles' Annual Report 2024–25 reports that 32.90 lakh artisans had been mobilised under the Pahchan initiative by 30 December 2024 (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2025). This indicates substantial administrative reach for artisan identification. However, registration or mobilisation is not equivalent to regular employment, adequate income, access to social protection, or participation in decision-making.

EPCH's 38th Annual Report states that handicraft exports, excluding hand-knotted carpets, rose from ₹30,019.24 crore in 2022–23 to ₹32,758.80 crore in 2023–24, a reported increase of 9.13% in rupee terms and 6.11% in US-dollar terms (EPCH, 2024). The difference between rupee and dollar growth underlines the importance of specifying the currency basis when reporting export trends. These aggregate figures suggest international market activity, but they cannot establish that all craft categories grew, that every producer benefited, or that export growth strengthened cultural continuity.

The Ministry's annual reporting also describes the National Handicrafts Development Programme and the Comprehensive Handicrafts Cluster Development Scheme as key policy mechanisms for marketing support, skill development, artisan welfare, infrastructure, technology, research, and cluster development (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2025). Programme existence and expenditure are inputs or outputs; their longer-term impact on income stability, women's participation, youth entry, and intergenerational transmission requires separate outcome evaluation.

4.5 Commercialization creates both opportunities and risks

The documentary synthesis points to a dual relationship between markets and continuity. Demand, exhibitions, export channels, and digital platforms may improve visibility and revenue opportunities. Yet aggregate market expansion does not necessarily improve artisans' bargaining power or preserve the cultural context of a product. The livelihood literature stresses the importance of assets, institutions, and agency (Bebbington, 1999; Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998), while cultural economics cautions against equating market price with cultural value (Throsby, 2001).

A defensible secondary-data finding is therefore that market growth and cultural safeguarding should be evaluated separately and then considered together. Market indicators should be complemented by evidence on producer prices, intermediary margins, repeat orders, income volatility, access to raw materials, youth apprenticeship, artisan control over design, and community approval of heritage representation.

5. DISCUSSION

The documentary analysis supports five connected conclusions. First, handicrafts can be material expressions of ritual practice and customary life. Second, the knowledge embedded in making is a core part of living heritage. Third, craft can communicate identity and memory without being culturally static. Fourth, administrative reach and export performance show that the sector has policy and economic significance, but neither metric is a proxy for household welfare. Fifth, commercialization can support continuity when artisans retain agency and receive fair value, but may weaken it where market demands displace community priorities.

These findings align with heritage approaches that prioritise community participation and living practice (UNESCO, 2003; Harrison, 2013) and livelihood approaches that place agency and resource access at the centre of sustainable work (Sen, 1999; Scoones, 1998). The article's contribution is not a new causal model or a

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statistically generalisable estimate. It is a triangulated synthesis that places cultural meaning, artisan livelihoods, and market transformation in a common analytical frame.

The evidence also exposes an information gap. Official programme and export reports provide important aggregate indicators, but they do not consistently connect craft-specific cultural continuity with artisan-level economic outcomes. Future programme evaluation would benefit from longitudinal and cluster-level information on income, market access, skill transmission, working conditions, and the degree to which artisans influence product design and heritage narratives.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Adopt a dual-value approach. Craft enterprises and brands should evaluate products on both commercial performance and cultural integrity. Alongside sales and margins, track artisan attribution, documented provenance, community-approved storytelling, and the continuation of core techniques.

Build fair and transparent value chains. Managers should make pricing, payment schedules, rejection criteria, and order changes transparent. Where possible, use longer-term procurement relationships, timely payments, and traceable artisan-level remuneration rather than treating craft as a low-cost input.

Use co-design rather than extraction. Design teams should work with artisans as knowledge partners, agree on ownership and permitted uses of motifs, and compensate creative contributions. Ritual or community-specific designs should not be repurposed without appropriate consultation.

Segment markets responsibly. Distinguish ritual or customary-use products from contemporary décor and lifestyle adaptations. Product labels should explain materials, techniques, place of origin, and the nature of any modern modification without making unsupported authenticity claims.

Strengthen digital capability with business support. Online marketing training should be combined with photography, product costing, packaging, logistics, customer service, intellectual-property awareness, and analytics. Digital channels should complement, not automatically replace, existing local relationships and collective selling arrangements.

Measure outcomes beyond sales. Track repeat orders, net artisan earnings, payment delays, access to raw materials, participation of women and younger makers, skill-transfer opportunities, and artisans' control over production decisions.

7. PRACTICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Support intergenerational learning. Expand apprenticeships, community workshops, and master-artisan programmes that provide payment for teaching time and practical access to tools and materials. Documentation should record processes as well as final products.

Evaluate schemes through outcomes. Government and development agencies should supplement counts of registered artisans, events, and training sessions with indicators of income stability, market access, skill retention, social protection, and participation in collective decisions.

Invest in craft-cluster infrastructure. Shared facilities, testing and finishing equipment, storage, reliable transport, common digital services, and access to quality raw materials can reduce costs without requiring every artisan to individually bear investment risk.

Protect cultural knowledge and attribution. Develop community-informed protocols for photography, digital archives, commercial use of motifs, and sharing of sacred or restricted knowledge. Recognition and consent should accompany commercial promotion.

Create more direct and diversified market access. Public exhibitions, craft fairs, responsible tourism, e-commerce, institutional procurement, and partnerships with museums or design schools can diversify sales. Interventions should be adapted to each craft cluster rather than based on a one-size-fits-all model.

Promote inclusive participation. Training, credit, technology, and marketing support should be accessible to women artisans, home-based workers, small producers, and younger practitioners, with attention to language, mobility, care responsibilities, and digital access.

Coordinate cultural and economic policy. Heritage bodies, craft-development agencies, education institutions, local government, and producer organisations should jointly plan for safeguarding, livelihood development, and local cultural priorities.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This article is limited by the availability, scope, and comparability of published sources. The Thathera case is a documented example, not a representative sample of all Indian crafts. Export figures describe aggregate trade and do not reveal income distribution, working conditions, or cultural effects. Administrative artisan-registration figures measure programme reach rather than sustained welfare. The documentary method cannot independently

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verify all claims made in source documents, and the selected sources do not provide a common quantitative measure of ritual significance, cultural identity, or intergenerational continuity.

Future research could develop a craft-cluster evidence dashboard combining official scheme data with transparent indicators of artisan income, producer share of final price, training outcomes, youth participation, women's participation, digital sales, and knowledge transmission. Comparative case studies across regions and craft types could identify which market arrangements best support both cultural agency and livelihood security. Participatory research should involve artisan organisations in defining what cultural continuity means and which information may be made public.

9. CONCLUSION

Indian handicrafts are best understood as living cultural practices that connect objects with ritual use, folk knowledge, regional identity, collective memory, and livelihoods. Secondary evidence illustrates these connections through UNESCO's documentation of traditional Thathera metalwork and the wider safeguarding framework for traditional craftsmanship. Official data also show substantial artisan-registration reach and significant export activity. Yet these aggregate indicators should not be mistaken for proof that income is secure, that benefits are fairly distributed, or that cultural knowledge is being transmitted successfully in every craft community.

The central conclusion is that cultural safeguarding and economic development should not be treated as competing objectives. The strongest approach is likely to be one in which artisans exercise meaningful control over how their knowledge is represented and adapted, receive fair remuneration, can access markets and infrastructure, and have viable opportunities to teach the next generation. Managers should build transparent and respectful value chains; policymakers should evaluate programmes through livelihood and transmission outcomes, not only activity counts; and heritage institutions should prioritise community consent, attribution, and living practice.

Because this article uses secondary evidence, its findings are interpretive and descriptive rather than causal. It does not report primary survey results or inferential statistics. Its contribution is to synthesise available documentary evidence and identify actionable priorities for future craft development and evaluation

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40. Data and transparency statement
41. This article is based on secondary documentary sources and published aggregate statistics. No primary human-participant data were collected, and no new statistical analysis of individual-level data was conducted. The export figures and artisan-registration count are reproduced from the cited sources. The article should be updated if newer official figures become available before journal submission

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