

PROBLEMS AND REVIVAL OF HANDICRAFT INDUSTRY IN KASHMIR – AN ANALYSIS

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Handicraft is the process of weaving beauty with hands that possess a universal appeal. A definition by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Trade Centre (ITC), sums the relevance of the handicrafts as "Products that are produced by artisans, either completely by hand or with the help of hand-tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of the finished product... The special nature of artisanal products derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant" (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2020).

Since ages, handicrafts have remained the backbone of Jammu & Kashmir's economy. Besides, it plays a huge role in the preservation of traditional art, heritage and culture, skills as well as talents associated with history and lifestyle of the people. There are about 2.50 lacs artisans who are directly dependent upon handicrafts for their livelihood. There is great potential in this sector for generating more employment opportunities if its markets are expanded and demand is increased. Presently, our handicrafts earn around Rs.1700 crores as foreign exchange annually (Directorate of Handicrafts, Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 2020). The handicraft products of Kashmir include Carpets, shawls, Wood Carving items, Chain Stitch items, Papier Machie, Crewel and Namdha.

However, presently this industry is not in its bloom. It is said to be underperformed due to multiple reasons that include lack of a Kashmir brand, obsolete designs, exploitative middlemen and competition from machine-made fabrics, low capital, poor exposure to new technologies, absence of market intelligence, poor infrastructure and institutional framework and many more. The turmoil in the valley had further aggravated the problems experienced by this sector.

This paper is aimed to identify the problems and challenges faced by this industry and explore the possibilities for its revival. The paper is a part of a larger study (supported by ICSSR) that is exploratory in nature aimed to understand the prospects and challenges of handicraft industry of Kashmir. For this research, the data has been collected from the secondary sources and interviews of the artisans and people associated with this industry. Jammu and Kashmir Economic Reviews, census data, reports of J&K Directorate of Handicrafts and other related literature include the secondary literature used for this paper. The primary and secondary data collected was compiled for the purpose of comprehensive analysis regarding challenges of this industry and initiatives taken, so that the appropriate recommendation are made.

Handicrafts in Kashmir

Handicrafts refers to the hand-made products, often made with simple traditional tools, that are general artistic and traditional in nature. They provide with a galore of opportunities for employment and that too with low capital investment and have immense potential to become an emphatic source for foreign earnings. As the handicraft sector is predominantly labour intensive, the sector contributes significantly to employment generation.

The handicraft products from Kashmir have gained worldwide fame for their appealing designs, functional utility and high-quality craftsmanship. In absence of other manufacturing industries in the state, handicrafts remained a key economic activity from time immemorial. Crafts like Shawls, Crewel, Namdha, Chain Stitch, Wood Carving, Papier Machie, Costume Jewellery, Kani Shawls and the Carpets hold a significant share in the overall production and