

COVID-19 Response: Non-profits in the Indian Crafts Sector

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Abstract

This study presents an overview of initiatives by non-profits and social enterprises in the crafts sector in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has hit India's handicraft sector hard, the impact exacerbated by the fact that it is a sector dominated by small-scale enterprises and independent practitioners, without the safety nets of a formal economy. Predominantly rural based, the crafts sector in India is a major contributor to the non-farm rural economy, second only to agriculture¹. COVID-19 has disrupted the entire crafts supply chain, with lockdowns cutting off access to workshops, raw materials, and supplies, and shutting down of market fairs and retail exhibitions leading to piling up of unsold inventory. In response to this crisis, a unique collaborative model of response emerged from non-profit organisations and social enterprises in the crafts sector; involving digital onboarding and direct access to market for artisans through online channels, this model has fundamentally reshaped the market access ecosystem in the sector. This co-operative effort on capacity building of artisans and enhancing supply chain capabilities including digital market access, while putting artisans at the forefront – with direct access to consumers and knowledge of end-retail pricing models – has the potential to be a game changer for the sector. The study traces the responses of these organisations in the crafts sector over 18 months since the first lockdown in the country in March 2020, using social media research. It identifies the patterns or common threads and outliers amongst these responses, and analyses the implications of the responses for the sector.

Keywords: Indian crafts, COVID-19, non-profits, artisan, collaboration, digital

¹ Dasra, *Crafting a Livelihood*, 2013.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Crafts Sector in India

The crafts sector in India is a vital socio economic and cultural force, being the second largest source of livelihood in rural India after agriculture. Between 7 million (official figures) to 200 million (various unofficial estimates) engage with the sector for livelihood generation.² There is a lack of robust data due to the decentralised, informal, fluid, network-based, household-oriented nature of the sector. Artisanal work can be part time or full time, supplementary to agriculture, and vice versa. There are artisans who work seasonally full time and then combine their handcraft production with work as rural labour.

The report of the Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019–20, throws ample light on the handloom-based crafts sector of the country. The census estimates the total number of handloom artisans in the country at 3.5 million, with 3 million of them based in rural India. Only around 50 per cent of them are engaged full time in crafts production, while the other half participates only part time. Around 73 per cent of handloom artisans are independent practitioners while 20 per cent work under a master artisan. The informal, decentralised, community-based nature of the sector is very evident. An estimated 88.7 per cent of weaver households are in rural India. The sector features very high participation of female workers with nearly 72 per cent of total handloom weavers being women. Any meaningful intervention in the sector has tremendous potential for women empowerment. The majority of handloom households are geographically concentrated in east and northeast India, with the largest number of weavers in Assam (10.9 lakhs) followed by West Bengal (3.4 lakhs), Manipur (2.1 lakhs), and Tamil Nadu (1.7 lakhs). A staggering 67 per cent of handloom households earn less than Rs 5000 per month, indicating a serious undervaluation of artisanal skills in contemporary India.³

In 2012, as a result of advocacy by various civil society organisations in the crafts sector, mainly Crafts Council of India (CCI), the sector was included in the national economic census for the first time. The sixth national economic census conducted in 2013–14 estimates the total number of crafts establishments in the country at 1.87 million, providing employment to 4.2 million people. Self-owned establishments accounted for 96.6 per cent of the total, with 67 per cent of them being informal, household enterprises. Around 22 per cent of the establishments were owned by women. West Bengal had the largest number of crafts establishments (17.6 per cent) followed by Uttar Pradesh (16.5 per cent), Odisha (7.8 per cent), Andhra Pradesh (7.5 per cent), and Tamil Nadu (6.80 per cent). The sector was found to be inherently small scale with average employment per establishment estimated at 2.24.⁴

The crafts sector has a formidable presence in the export sector of the country. Handicrafts exports from the country during 2020–21 amounted to Rs 25,679.98 crores. The US is the major market for Indian handicraft exports with 38.38 per cent export market share, followed by the UAE at 6.1 per

² Dasra, *Crafting a Livelihood*, 2013; Ministry of Textiles, *Working Group Report on Handicrafts for 12th Five Year Plan* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2011); Crafts Council of India (CCI), *Craft Economics and Impact Study: Stage 1 & Stage 2*, 2011.

³ Ministry of Textiles, *Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019–20*, <http://handlooms.nic.in/>.

⁴ Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, *All India Report of Sixth Economic Census*.

cent. The Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts (EPCH), the apex body of handicrafts exporters in the country, has 9594 members as of 2019–20.⁵

A repository of artisanal skills armed with a formidable crafts population, the Indian crafts sector faces the challenge of appropriate valuation of craft skills and knowledge; the wages and modes of engagement fall short of the standards applicable to a modern knowledge economy based profession. The *Craft Economics and Impact Study* (CEIS) undertaken by the CCI in 2011 found that the bulk of the artisanal income in the country falls within the range of Rs 20,000–2,00,000 per annum.⁶ And as noted above, the national handloom census conducted in 2019–20 estimated that 67 per cent of handloom households earn less than Rs 5000 per month.⁷

Apart from the economic and livelihood aspects, crafts are a symbol of our heritage embedded with socio-cultural meaning and identity. They are a springboard for creativity and innovation, allowing us to draw upon the past to create tools to respond effectively to change. Crafts in essence have what David Pye called ‘the workmanship of risk’ – the skilled manipulation of material that affords unplanned breakthroughs – with innovation as an enduring feature.⁸ Modern designers are increasingly looking at the wealth of knowledge and possibilities of traditional crafts practices and materials to develop climate resilient and responsible design solutions.⁹ Crafts have a huge potential role to play in the global developmental agenda, especially in the context of the development paradigm led by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The inherent characteristics of crafts – local and small-scale production, ecological practices, cultural meaning, authenticity, employment of women and marginalised sections, rural base, use of traditional knowledge and local materials, environmental sensitivity, low carbon footprint, diversity – contribute directly to many of the SDGs.¹⁰

The value of craft skills as a vital part of the ‘creative economy’¹¹ – knowledge-based economic activities arising out of the interplay between human creativity, cultural values, knowledge, and heritage – is not fully realised. One can see a lack of representation of the crafts sector in recent discourses on ‘sunrise sectors’: cutting edge sectors that hold potential for innovation, economic transformation and impact.

On the other hand, 2021 has been declared the International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development at the 74th United Nations General Assembly¹². The UN resolution recognised the role of the ‘creative economy in creating full and productive employment and decent work, supporting entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, encouraging the formalization and growth of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, stimulating innovation, empowering people, promoting social inclusion, and reducing poverty’. In 2005, the Jodhpur Consensus on Cultural Industries had recognised cultural and creative industries ‘as a source of capital assets for economic, social and cultural development’ and ‘a vital source for the cultural identities of communities and individuals which lead to further creativity and human development. What cultural industries have in common is

⁵ Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts, *Annual Report 2021*.

⁶ Craft Council of India, *Craft Economics and Impact Study: Stage 1 & Stage 2*.

⁷ Ministry of Textiles, *Fourth All India Handloom Census 2019–20*, <http://handlooms.nic.in/>.

⁸ Pye, David. *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*. London : Cambridge University Press, 1968; Craft Council of UK, *Innovation through Craft*, 2016.

⁹ Franco, Jose. ‘Innovative cooling installation fights soaring temperatures in New Delhi,’ *ArchDaily*, 14 May 2019.

¹⁰ “SDG Knowledge”, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

¹¹ International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development, 2021. UNCTAD.

¹² <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/international-years/creativeeconomy2021>.

that they create content, use creativity, skill and in some cases intellectual property, to produce goods and services with social and cultural meaning'.¹³

The UN declaration itself derives from the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (2015) in which it adopted universal, transformative goals for sustainable development in three dimensions – economic, social, and environmental – in a holistic manner.¹⁴ The SDGs envision a development agenda based on inclusive growth, equitable opportunities, social justice and empowerment, with environmental concern leading to 'sustainable development'. As noted, crafts have a huge potential role to play in the SDG-led development paradigm, with their inherent characteristics positioning them at the forefront of addressing developmental challenges in the SDG framework. India with its large artisanal population and varied crafts skills can emerge as a pioneer in this new narrative of development, offering innovative solutions towards realising a better planet for all.

1.2. Mapping the Crafts Landscape: Stakeholders

Artisans

The vast pool of artisans, with their craft skills and knowledge, form the centre of the Indian crafts ecosystem. Craft skills and knowledge are largely passed down inter-generationally, within the community fold. The artisan population comprises highly skilled master artisans, apprentices, part-time artisans, and wage workers, with the majority of them being self-employed and working as family units.¹⁵ The absence of feeder skills, which could help them to navigate and participate fully in the modern economy, inhibits their capacity to realise their full potential in the contemporary creative and cultural economy. There are the twin challenges of 'vastly asymmetric information as well as asymmetric capabilities between the artisan and the market operators'.¹⁶

Government

The prominent role of crafts in the country's freedom struggle led to due importance being accorded to the sector at the policy level in independent India. Various programmes and institutions were built around the sector: the Cottage Industries Board, the All India Handicrafts & Handloom Board, emporiums, and awards for craftspeople. The Khadi and Other Handloom Industries Development Act was passed in Parliament in 1953, and the All India Handloom Fabrics Marketing Cooperative Society set up in 1955. The global reputation of Indian craftsmanship helped the country to earn much-needed foreign exchange at the time. The Handloom and Handicrafts Export Corporation of India Ltd (HHEC) was set up in 1958 to promote export of handlooms and handicrafts. The Office of Development Commissioner for Handlooms was created at the central government level based on the recommendations of a high-powered committee appointed in 1976. The government runs various schemes for the sector in cluster development, skill upgradation, raw material assistance, engagement of expert professionals, and marketing assistance, along with certifications and awards.

Non-profit organisations

Non-profit organisations have a significant presence in crafts and function as a strong pillar for the sector. Since crafts constitute the largest non-farm area of livelihoods in rural areas, with a high partic

¹³ UNCTAD, *Creative Economy Report 2010*; Ashoke Chatterjee, 'Can Our Future be Handmade?' CCRT.

¹⁴ "SDG Knowledge", Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

¹⁵ Dasra, *Crafting a Livelihood*. 2013.

¹⁶ Maureen Liebl and Tirthankar Roy, 'Handmade in India: A Preliminary Analysis of Crafts and Craft Production,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 51/52 (2003): 5366-76.

ipation of women and marginalised sections in the workforce, it holds great potential for interventions towards a transformative impact. Nonprofits in the crafts sector address both the socio-economic and cultural aspects of crafts and range from producer groups, market access organisations, skilling organisations, revival and research programmes to documentation and museums. There are interventions from non-profit organisations in every part of the value chain in the crafts sector and they play a huge role in sustaining the crafts capacities of the country. Dastkar, Urmul, Khamir, Dastkari Haat Samiti, Kala Raksha, various Craft Councils, and Craft Revival Trust are a few non-profit organisations which have been working in the sector for decades.

For-profit ventures

For-profit ventures engaging with the crafts sector range from corporations, exporters, design studios, independent design practitioners, social enterprises, collectives, cooperative societies, small businesses, entrepreneurs, and traders to offline and online marketplaces. These ventures play an important role in the crafts value chain, providing market access and linkages to the artisans. A renewed interest in sustainability has put the sector in the spotlight for many brands to engage with and capitalise on. International luxury brands and mass market brands engage with the sector currently, at varying spectrums of the value chain. The arrival of conscious brands and social businesses has led to a positive change in the nature of private enterprises' relationship with artisans. For-profit ventures have brought in much-needed supply chain efficiencies, market intelligence, product innovations, and quality infusion into the sector, and remain a significant consumer of crafts production in the country. Fabindia, Anokhi, 2M Atelier, Aditya, Vastrakala, and Good Earth are some of the ventures which tap into the skills and knowledge of the sector to produce contemporary objects of superior value.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes

Increasingly, CSR engagements that cover the entire spectrum of value chain – from skilling programmes, product innovation, market intelligence, access to research, education, documentation, and advocacy – are becoming visible in the sector. The Lady Bamford Foundation, HCL Foundation, Antaran (Tata Trust), Jaipur Rugs Foundation, Ambuja Neotia, Somaiya Trust, Lucknow Design Trust are some of the organisations with an active presence in the sector. The Lady Bamford Foundation established Nila House which is conceived as a centre of excellence in crafts and works in the area of research and indigo revival projects with craft communities. Antaran offers skill development programmes and direct market access channels for artisans. Ambuja Neotia, Somaiya, and Lucknow Design Trust support educational programmes in the field of crafts and design. CSR programmes bring in process capabilities, larger bandwidth for orders, and capital infusion which can sustain broad-based interventions in the sector covering a large number of artisanal clusters and groups.

Educational institutions

The role of educational institutions operating in the sector is mainly twofold: building artisan capabilities and creating a cadre of young professionals who can work with the artisans to positively impact the crafts ecosystem of the country. Major areas of focus in the curricula of these institutions are design, business capabilities, and technology. Somaiya Kala Vidya (SKV), Kala Raksha, Handloom School, and Kalhath Institute are a few educational institutions established exclusively for artisans. Kalhath and Handloom School focus on specific crafts skills such as embroidery and weaving while SKV addresses broader design and business capabilities. All of them offer free or highly subsidised

programmes for artisans, duly supported by philanthropy and CSR funds. The Indian Institute of Crafts & Design (IICD), Indian Institute of Handloom Technology, National Institute of Fashion Technology, and National Institute of Design are some of the major educational institutions which prepare young professionals to work in the sector. Increasingly, crafts consciousness and training are becoming part of the curricula of mainstream design schools across the country with modules being developed specifically for grassroots engagement of students with crafts clusters.

Incubators and business mentorship

This is relatively a new development, involving incubators and accelerators focusing on the sector and building custom programmes tailored to the needs of the sector. These programmes help to bring in young professionals from varying backgrounds to engage with the sector and create impactful interventions. Startup Oasis which runs dedicated accelerator and incubation programmes for crafts, Creative and Cultural Businesses Programme (CCBP) at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, AIC Catalyst incubator by Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR) and Nest are some examples. Many of these programmes are consciously inclusive with dedicated seats for participation of artisans in the programme. CCBP reserves five scholarship seats for artisans, NGOs, and social enterprises. Startup Oasis has dedicated outreach and participation of artisans, NGOs, and artisan-led enterprises in their programmes. Jawaja Leather Association, an artisan-led rural cooperative, and Gramin Vikas Evam Chetna Sansthan, Barmer, were part of the accelerator cohort of Startup Oasis along with crafts-based startups.

Impact funds and investors

A relatively recent phenomenon is the emergence of funds and impact investors with special focus on the crafts sector. Innovative Ventures and Technologies for Development (INVENT) programme and Rise Artisan Fund are funds with special focus on crafts-based enterprises. Aavishkar Capital is another impact investor which has invested in multiple crafts-based ventures in India such as Rang-sutra, DAH, and Jaypore. As impact investing gains momentum across the world, more of these engagements are likely in the Indian crafts sector, making it an exciting space to watch.

Marketplaces

The traditional marketplaces for Indian crafts, apart from the export sector, are primarily exhibitions and melas (market fairs). The tactile nature of crafts objects, the physical presence of the artisan, and the scope of conversation with the maker make these marketplaces appealing for a crafts consumer. Many of these melas (market fairs) are curated and actively supported by non-profit organisations working in the crafts sector and governments, with free participation and even travel and stay expenses taken care of for artisans in many cases. Around 25,000 melas (market fairs) are organised annually in India; these are a mix of events based on religious festivals (70 percent), commercial exhibitions (20 percent), and cultural trade fairs (10 per cent).¹⁷ COVID-19 completely disrupted this traditional distribution model and accelerated the entry of online marketplaces in the crafts sector. With the digital marketplace being the only market access channel during the pandemic, fervent efforts were made by non-profits to help artisans transition to the new marketplace by building onboarding capabilities and resources for crafts groups and artisans. Digital marketplaces have gained a firm foothold in the crafts sector; there has been considerable onboarding of artisans into digital platforms across the crafts sector during the last two years. Many marketplaces also host online classes by artisans –

¹⁷ "Border & Fall, The Mela: Craft's Distribution Model.", <http://www.borderandfall.com/karigar/mela-crafts-distribution-model/>.

presenting the maker, the process, and the tradition – engaging and forging connections with the audience.

Research and knowledge

There is an increasing awareness of the value of artisanal knowledge, skills, and processes as vital components of the creative economy and not as obsolete relics of the past. These knowledge systems and skills can act as a springboard for enhancing creative capacity and innovation in society. Nila House, Shrujan, Khamir, IICD, Adivasi Academy, and Crafts Council of Weavers & Artisans (CCWA) are some of the organisations working in this field through research, revival, documentation, workshops, and building repositories of crafts knowledge.

Consultancy organisations

Recognising the potential of the artisan economy for sustainable development and India's competitive advantage in crafts-based human capital, specialised consultancy organisations have recently emerged in the sector. They primarily work in the areas of targeted global market linkages, sustainable sourcing, partnerships, marketing solutions, and business mentoring. Examples of organisations working in this capacity in the crafts sector include Raaha Consulting, 200 Million Artisans, Connecting with India, and Nest.

1.3. COVID-19 and the Crafts Sector

The crafts economy across the globe was affected significantly by COVID-19. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that more than 300 million people are engaged in crafts-based production across the globe. In a survey of 200 artisan-based businesses by Nest, a global non-profit working in the handworker economy, it was found that 68 per cent businesses suffered cancellation of orders and 71 per cent of businesses had to terminate employment with artisans. The overall sales went down by 70 per cent.¹⁸

India, which has a significant crafts population, witnessed great panic and uncertainty in the crafts sector, with order cancellations, pending payments, absence of market demand, raw material issues, and unsold inventory leading to a livelihood crisis along with pandemic health emergency. The effect of lockdown was extremely pronounced in the crafts sector with its already fragmented supply chain, fragile working capital reserves, and next to nil social protection net. Change in consumer behaviour in the midst of the pandemic, with the focus being squarely on 'essential goods', greatly reduced the market demand for crafts products. The primary point of sales for individual artisans and small producer groups – exhibitions and melas (market fairs) – simply disappeared. The human connection and interaction with the maker, which is an important aspect of crafts consumption, became impossible. A study done by All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association (AIACA) on 59 crafts-based enterprises (including individual artisans) revealed large-scale order cancellations and orders put on hold in both the domestic and exports sectors. More than half of the surveyed enterprises witnessed over 75 per cent decline in their overall sales.¹⁹

The relief efforts by central and state governments helped vulnerable artisans get ration kits and mon

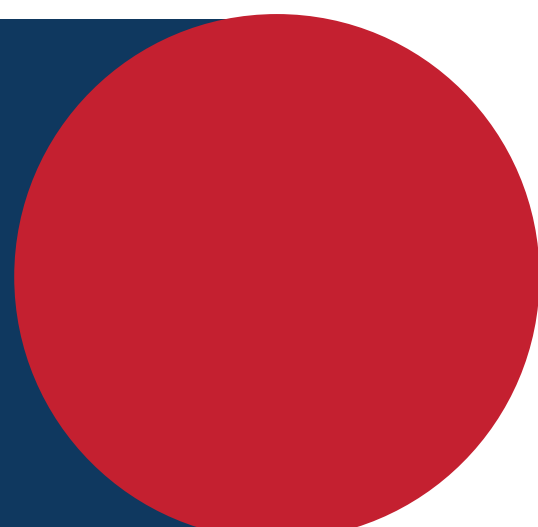
18 "COVID-19 Impact on Artisan and Maker Businesses", Nest, <https://www.buildanest.org/covid-19-response/covid-19-relief-grants/>.

19 "AIACA, The Covid Impact on Artisans, Part II", www.aiacaonline.org.

etary support during the lockdown phase. The Ministry of Textiles launched the 'Vocal4Local' campaign in 2020 on National Handloom Day (9 November) to support the artisan community and craft enterprises.²⁰ The Ministry of Tribal Affairs through TRIFED supported tribal artisans by procuring unsold inventory, providing working capital, establishing linkages with buyers, and distributing ration and health kits.²¹ The One District One Product (ODOP) scheme by the Uttar Pradesh government helped artisans sell their produce through online channels.²² The central government's Government e-Market place (GeM) enabled artisans to sell their products directly to various government entities.²³

The pandemic-related demand for specific products – especially masks and to an extent home decor products – helped some of the producers to keep the wheel spinning and hands occupied. However, a large number of artisans were not able to capitalise on this because of lack of working capital reserves. Many non-profits in the crafts sector provided the crucial working capital required at this stage by placing advance payment-based orders for masks and providing raw material, bringing in much-needed relief.

The crafts sector, like many others, has not been able to recover significantly from the impact. The AIACA study reported that the ease of business operation hovered at 45–48 per cent for the respondents in the unlock phase.²⁴ A survey by the British Council and Fashion Revolution India involving 106 craft consumers showed that 69 per cent of the consumers lowered their frequency of purchasing craft products post COVID-19.²⁵ Artisan clusters like Kutch which see a significant share of revenue coming from international travellers will have to wait till seamless international tourism resumes. The sector would require active assistance from government and civil society in terms of financial packages, tax incentives, targeted support from the corporate sector and chambers of commerce, investment in digital capabilities, product strategy, and importantly, creating consciousness amongst consumers about the critical nature and impact of the sector.



²⁰ Press Information Bureau (PIB), 'Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on textile industry.' 22 September 2020.

²¹ PIB, 'Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on textile industry.' 22 September 2020.

²² Ismat Ara, 'As COVID-19 impact continues, UP artisans are selling their goods online, <https://thewire.in/>.

²³ PIB, 'Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on textile industry.' 22 September 2020.

²⁴ AIACA, *The Covid Impact on Artisans, Part II*. 13 July 2020.

²⁵ British Council & Fashion Revolution India, *Reimagining the Craft Economy Post Covid-19*. 3 October 2021.

2. Methodology

2.1. Approach

This report is based on insights from a digital survey of COVID-19 response initiatives by 30 non-profit organisations working in the crafts sector over a period of 18 months from March 2020 to September 2021. The study relied on social media as a tool for data collection and primarily tracked data via Instagram posts.

Appendix 1 presents profiles of the types of organisations whose response initiatives have been studied. Using an analytical framework and questionnaire (Annexure 2), this study examines two broad research questions:

- a. What are the response mechanisms adopted by non-profit organisations in the crafts sector to the COVID-19 crisis?
- b. What patterns can be discerned in the response mechanisms across the surveyed non-profit organisations?

This was supplemented by qualitative interviews with personnel from six organisations to gauge insights and understand ground-breaking shifts in practices, best practices, and perspectives on recovery and resilience.

2.2. Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted, ensuring the sample composition is broadly representative of the thematic spread of non-profit operational areas in the crafts sector in India: market access, education and skilling, business mentorship and grants, product development, research, documentation, and advocacy.

Arriving at the appropriate sample size was challenging as public records of the number of nonprofits operating in the crafts sector are not available. However, a metric available in the public domain is the list of NGOs empanelled with the Office of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts); the total number of empanelled NGOs amounts to 1269.²⁶ By this estimate, the sample size is 2.36 per cent of the total population. It is also to be noted that a large number of non-profits existing in the crafts sector are not empanelled with the Office of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts).

Social Media and Non Profits

Social media allows non-profits to reach and engage with a significantly large audience in a fast, real-time and cost-effective manner. According to the Open Data Project, currently 89 per cent of non-profits worldwide use social media in their digital marketing and fundraising strategy.²⁷ There are

²⁶ Ministry of Textiles, 'List of Empanelled NGOs, Development Commissioner (Handicrafts).

²⁷ NonProfit Tech for Good, Open Data Project 2021, www.nptechforgood.com/open-data-project/.

4.55 billion social media users around the world, working out to 57.6 per cent of the total global population.²⁸ In the past, nonprofits used newsletters and annual reports to share their work and engage with their audience. Today, nonprofits can upload their work and messages to social media in real time and enable their audience or consumers to feel more connected to the craft and cause. The interactive nature of social media allows the audience to participate and engage more effectively, with constant communication loops aided by engagement tools inbuilt within social media accounts. Social media is a potent tool for a non-profit organisation to increase its reach, communicate the causes which it supports, keep the audiences engaged, attract new audiences and donors, grow the volunteer network, and enable fundraising. Facebook and Instagram allow non-profits to add 'donate' buttons and run fundraisers from their accounts. The postings are free and interactive, enabling 'social listening', where one can also gauge audience perception and interests based on social media monitoring tools.²⁹

Social media became the primary medium for information consumption and dissemination for organisations and individuals in the pandemic. With limitations on in-person interaction due to COVID-19, people increasingly turned to social media to remain connected, consume information, and get entertained. Social media engagement in India increased 61 per cent during the first wave of the pandemic.³⁰ In the country's devastating second wave of COVID-19, social media became a crucial tool for mobilising and amplifying requests for resources such as medicines, beds, oxygen cylinders, oximeters. Individuals, celebrities, civil society organisations, nonprofits all actively used social media for assistance.³¹

Instagram, launched in 2010 and acquired by Facebook, has a worldwide community base of over 1 billion users and 25 million businesses on its site.³² The visual storytelling focus of Instagram has made it a favourite app for brands and individuals alike. A Hootsuite Instagram stats-list suggests that 60 per cent people discover products through Instagram and fashion is the third-most followed category by users globally on Instagram, behind music and entertainment.³³ The Open Data Project estimates that 89 per cent of non-profits worldwide use social media in their digital marketing and fundraising strategy and 75 per cent of those use Instagram.³⁴ Instagram allows non-profits to add 'donate' buttons and run fundraisers from their accounts. Instagram also has a Live Donations feature for fundraisers that you can run yourself, or that other accounts can run on your behalf. One can also create donation stickers for Instagram Stories and allow people to share them.

The strong visual storytelling format of the platform creates higher engagement than other social media. Instagram provides a focused, relevant audience with potential to engage, which is critical to a brand/organisation on social media. Laila Tyabji, the renowned crafts activist, has this to say about the digital transition of crafts:

We all agree that half the charm of a craft object is the process, the maker and the tradition. The internet enables us to present this effectively and creatively, without physically having to transport

28 Kepios Analysis, Datareportal, <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users>.

29 Jacqueline Tabas, 'How nonprofits can use social media to increase donations and boost visibility,' *Forbes*, 6 March 2021.

30 Kantar, COVID-19 Barometer. 3 April 2020.

31 Ananya Bhattacharya, 'Social media is a resource gold mine for Covid-battered Indians—for better or for worse,' *Quartz India*, 26 April 2021; Asiya Naqvi, 'Social Media is the new helpline for a crisis-hit India,' 2 May 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

32 Sitanshi Talati-Parikh, 'Instagram's big impact on fashion,' *Mint*, <https://www.livemint.com/>.

33 Talati-Parikh, 'Instagram's big impact.'

34 NonProfit Tech for Good, Open Data Project 2021.

the artisan and his equipment and tools to the spot. To have the maker tell the story, show the material, and the technique that transforms it...If we can only do this successfully, in a visually engaging way, it will make up for that lack of touch and feel.³⁵

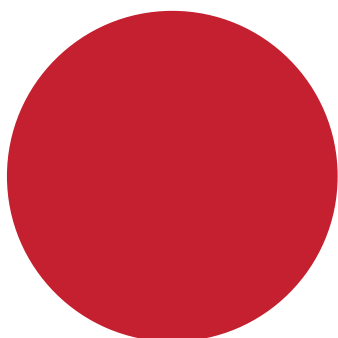
Instagram enables brands and organisations in the crafts sector to do precisely this, and that is why the bulk of crafts- and design-based brands and organisations have an active presence on Instagram, through which to engage meaningfully with the relevant audience.

The non-profit organisations in the crafts sector thus use the platform to engage with a conscious, interested audience.

Instagram has become the go-to social media platform for crafts organisations to share information, conduct product sales and online webinars, showcase initiatives, raise funds, and tell stories by creating visual narratives of the tactile nuances of craft techniques and processes. The engagement on the platform increased during the COVID-19 crisis as physical interactions became limited and digital became the primary tool of communication, including COVID-19 response initiatives. This is reflective of the larger trend of increase in engagement across social media during the pandemic.³⁶ Thus Instagram became a valuable resource to document and understand COVID-19 response initiatives, especially in a niche sector like crafts, where visual storytelling is high on the communication agenda.

2.3. Limitations

The study is exploratory in nature and presents findings based on analysis of a limited number of organisations on Instagram and through one-to-one surveys with select respondents. Due to the restrictions in in-person interaction due to COVID-19, the methodology has relied largely on digital presence, particularly Instagram handles of organisations, to collect data. This has significantly limited the study to organisations with an active digital presence on Instagram. The sample is also drawn based on personal assessment and networks, which may have rendered it not fully representative.



³⁵ Laila Tyabji, 'The coronavirus cloud has a potential silver lining for the Indian crafts sector,' *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/>.

³⁶ Kantar, COVID-19 Barometer.3 April 2020.

3. COVID-19 Response by Non-profits in the Crafts Sector

3.1. Findings

The key findings from the analysis can be subdivided into the following critical areas: digitisation, market access, collaborative initiatives, advocacy and awareness, relief, product development, skill development, knowledge and research, and fundraising.

Digitisation

COVID-19 accelerated digitisation across the crafts sector in an unprecedented manner. An overwhelming 77 per cent of the respondents used some form of digital initiatives as part of their COVID-19 response. Organisations worked actively to create digital catalogues of craft products, artisan clusters, and craft techniques. More than 350 digital catalogues were made and disseminated during this period. Legacy organisations in the sector, like Dastkar and Dastkari Haat Samiti, launched online stores to promote and sell their products.³⁷ Commitment to Kashmir, the CSR initiative of Titan that works exclusively in the crafts clusters of Kashmir, launched their online store during the pandemic. Programmes were initiated to equip artisans for digital onboarding with trainings in mobile-based photography, social media marketing, digital payments, and visual storytelling. Digitisation was used strategically to restore market access for crafts through online channels, which were the only point of sales available at the moment.

Online artisanal workshops were conducted by organisations to keep the artisan community engaged, sustain morale, and generate livelihood revenue. Most of these workshops were well attended as people were confined to their homes and had time on hand; these workshops provided a much-needed sense of play and wellbeing. Around 67 per cent of the organisations surveyed conducted virtual workshops with artisan communities. An overwhelming 93 per cent of the organisations prominently showcased artisans on their digital platforms along with initiating direct artisan connect programmes. This was a departure from the norm of backend supply chain secrecy, earlier viewed as a competitive advantage by organisations. Many artisans received direct enquiries, both nationally and internationally, for engagement and this has the potential for far-reaching impact on their businesses.

Market access

Market access was one of the major challenges faced by the crafts sector during the pandemic and non-profits invested their resources significantly in creating market access for artisans. Around 60 per cent of the respondents initiated market access programmes in one form or another. Organisations rightly identified digitisation as the route to restore market access for the sector and created programmes for digital cataloguing of products, building knowledge bytes on crafts online, showcasing artisans and crafts on social media, setting up artisan connect programmes for direct interaction with artisans and buyers digitally. More than 130 artisans were onboarded to digital platforms through Creative Dignity, a collective voluntary movement by various stakeholders in the sector.

³⁷ Creative Dignity. <https://createdignity.org/>,

"Dastkari Haat celebrates its 35th year of working with India's crafts persons". <https://dastkarihaat.com/blogs>, Adlakha, Nidhi. "Homegrown gifts and a Punya Box". The Hindu, <https://www.thehindu.com/>, Dastkar Store, <http://www.handsondastkar.com/>

Collaborations

Collaborations were key to COVID-19 response initiatives in the crafts sector. Never before has the sector seen this scale of collaboration amongst diverse actors in the crafts ecosystem. Around 67 per cent of the respondents have stitched some form of collaboration in their response initiatives. The foremost amongst them is the Creative Dignity movement which has around 500 diverse participants who came together to energise the crafts ecosystem and build capabilities to respond effectively to the crisis. Realising the magnitude of the crisis and the inability of a single actor to respond effectively to it, craft organisations, earlier operating independently, started to collaborate with each other. A heartening detail is that many of these collaborations are open source³⁸ and trust based – sharing information, skills, knowledge, and opportunities with each other all the while keeping the artisan at the centre of all interventions.

Advocacy and awareness

Organisations, realising the critical nature of the distress in the sector, actively worked to create consciousness and awareness of the cultural and economic aspect of the crafts traditions of the country. An overwhelming 87 per cent of the respondents created programmes for awareness and advocacy that highlighted the plight of the sector through multiple initiatives such as virtual tours, digital workshops, artisan stories, showcasing of crafts processes and materials, webinars for the general public, and engaging with government agencies and media. Many organisations were directly engaged in COVID-19 awareness programmes, especially at the grassroots level. About 40 per cent of the organisations surveyed had significantly invested their resources in COVID-19 awareness campaigns and programmes. These included health check-ups, setting up doctor helplines, implementing vaccination drives, and running mobile health camps.

Relief work

Around 57 per cent of the surveyed organisations were involved in direct relief work on the ground, including procurement and distribution of rations, sanitation, and medical kits for artisan communities.

Product development

Of the total surveyed organisations, 40 per cent engaged with artisan communities for product development during the pandemic, mainly for producing face masks. Many organisations provided advances and raw material for this, bringing in much-needed working capital for the artisans. Organisations like Adivasi Academy used this opportunity to commission revival pieces based on languishing techniques and time-consuming masterpieces which will accrue significant value in the coming years. Around 17 per cent of the organisations used artisanal skills to create learning products and programmes for children in place of traditional products which saw a dip in demand, thereby sustaining revenues for the community. These included DIY kits and educational games using craft techniques and processes.

Knowledge and research

Many organisations built digital engagement programmes to showcase artisanal knowledge systems and processes. About 83 per cent of the surveyed had displayed online knowledge relating to the

³⁸ Creative Dignity. <https://createdignity.org/>.

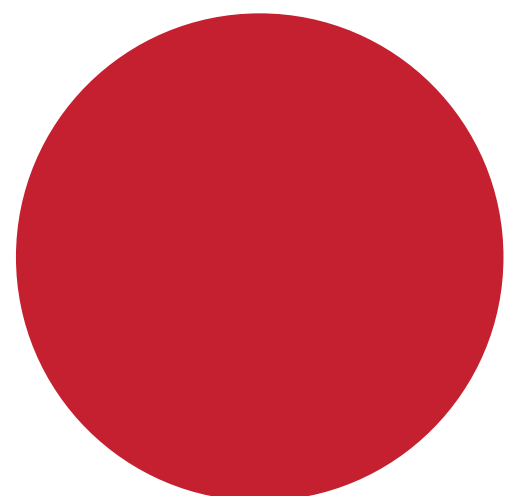
crafts ecosystem of the country. Some organisations such as Nila House and Adivasi Academy commissioned experimental projects with artisan communities in the areas of raw materials, product development, natural dyes, and documentation of recipes and processes. The artisan community, too, was open to experimental projects during the pandemic as they had ample time on their hands with regular work orders virtually coming to a halt.

Skill development

Around 40 per cent of the organisations engaged in skill development programmes with the artisan community during the pandemic. These initiatives were primarily of two types: digital onboarding skills and craft technique skills. Photography, social media, digital marketing, video making, and digital payments were the areas of skill development training that formed part of building capabilities for digital transition for artisans. Organisations like Adivasi Academy, Nilahouse³⁹ focused on enhancing the craft technique skills of artisans by commissioning sophisticated, skill-intensive work and using these to revive endangered and languishing techniques and processes.

Fundraising

Half of the surveyed organisations were directly engaged in fundraising activities for the sector. More than Rs 1.43 crore was raised by Creative Dignity³⁹ alone; this was probably the biggest collective movement to emerge in the crafts sector during the pandemic. Many other organisations raised funds individually and collectively for the sector. Online crowdfunding platforms played a major role in this regard. Ketto, a prominent online crowdfunding platform, hosted more than 100 separate fundraising campaigns for the crafts sector.



³⁹ Creative Dignity. <https://creativedignity.org/>.

4. Conclusion

The effect of digitisation across the craft supply chain has the potential to create fundamental shifts in the sector, with artisans acquiring capabilities to directly access and navigate the market. Antaran Artisan Connect, an online marketplace initiative by Tata Trust that provided direct market access to artisans, clocked a revenue of about Rs 4.25 crores – a 100 per cent YoY increase from last year (Rs 1.8 crores), despite it being a pandemic-impacted year.⁴⁰ Along with social media and social commerce, direct-to-consumer artisan brands and initiatives have the potential to reach global audiences with the right ecosystem support and feeder skills. The information poverty amongst artisans regarding market nuances and pricing will be radically reduced with access to digital technologies. COVID-19 crisis showed the fragility of the current crafts supply chain and the need for de-risking models for the same to evolve. Building a resilient localised supply chain ecosystem covering the entire value chain – from raw material to consumption – can supplement and de-risk other aspects of the current supply chain. Initiatives like Nila House are working with craft communities to evolve these models. The crisis has shown the effectiveness of having a single large consolidated buyer with capacities that can absorb disruption shocks and safeguard artisan producer groups better than multiple small buyers with a limited bandwidth; an example is IKEA for Industree. Producer groups would need to build systems and processes into their operations to engage with large consolidated buyers.

The adaptability shown by crafts producers in terms of realigning their product strategy – identifying pandemic-specific product opportunities and reassigning dead stocks to masks and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) production – can be harnessed into superior agility in responding to market intelligence in future. The crisis showed the need to optimise and rationalise inventory for artisan groups incorporating nimble and agile modes of operation with closer engagement with market intelligence. With the emerging digital model of market access, the possibilities of pre-ordered, bespoke inventory harnessing the strength of crafts-based small batch production seem real.

Innovation in products and processes while retaining the essence and identity of crafts will enhance the competitive advantage of this sector and facilitate spillover effects of these innovations in other industries. Initiatives such as ‘Crafting Futures’ by British Council, which foster mindful transnational collaboration in Indian crafts to enhance innovation potential and economic impact, are key in this regard.⁴¹ Initiatives like ‘National Toy Action Plan’ and ‘Make in India’ can synergise traditional craft techniques with contemporary design and technology through innovative collaborations.

Educational initiatives by non-profits on crafts techniques, processes, and tradition through online workshops and knowledge sessions can lead to the elevation of the perceptual value of crafts for the general populace. Crafted in India and Akshara are examples of good, digitally immersive experiential projects in this regard done by Dastkari Haat Samiti in collaboration with Google Arts & Culture.⁴²

⁴⁰ British Council & Fashion Revolution India, *Reimagining the Craft Economy Post Covid-19*.

⁴¹ British Council, *Crafting Futures India-UK Collaboration Scheme*. Open Call 2021.

⁴² Google Arts & Culture and Dastkari Haat Samiti, *Crafted in India*.

There is increasing consciousness amongst artisans about the critical value of their skills – importantly the value they add to sustainable production narratives of these times. Artisan-led initiatives such as CCWA are demanding active representation of artisans in policymaking for the sector as well as agency in responding to contemporary issues in crafts. The recent intervention and discourse on intellectual property rights of artisans and cultural appropriation, led by CCWA, in the Sabyasachi H&M collection issue is an example of this.⁴³

Collaboration and trust help the ecosystem to grow together while impacting all stakeholders: this has been a key learning for the sector during the pandemic. The collaborative initiatives forged during the pandemic brought in much-needed transparency in the crafts supply chain and sharing of data amongst stakeholders. A robust, open-access data platform correcting the information asymmetry between the artisans and market, and building synergies amongst all involved, can enable the mobilisation of meaningful interventions in the sector. The very fact that diverse stakeholders came together to support the sector during the pandemic in an unprecedented collaborative manner itself speaks of the value, in terms of knowledge and critical skill sets, that crafts add to various industries such as fashion, product design, interiors, and architecture. Craft skills have become important tools for sustainable production and circular design – valuable resources in the contemporary knowledge economy for the potential they hold. India, with its large crafts population, is an invaluable repository of these skills and knowledge, and needs to evolve strategies to realise the full value of its crafts sector.

⁴³ 'Sabyasachi responds to open letter by the Indian artisan community,' *The Times of India*, 18 August 2021.



5. Appendices

5.1. Appendix 1: Organisation Profiles

The table presents details of organisations surveyed for the study. Of the total organisations surveyed, 33 per cent focused on textile crafts and the remaining 67 per cent supported diverse crafts across soft material (textile, leather, paper, natural fibres), hard material (metal, wood, stone) and fired material (terracotta, ceramics, glass). The intervention of 30 per cent of the organisations was geographically limited to specific clusters while 70 per cent of the surveyed organisations have interventions in craft clusters across the country.

Sl. No	Name	Year of Establishment	Thematic Area	Material	Impact Area
1	Dastkar	1981	Advocacy, Capacity Building, Market Access	Diverse	Across India
2	Dastkari Haat Samiti	1986	Advocacy, Publication, Research, Market, Design	Diverse	Across India
3	Urmul	1986	Design, Market Access	Textiles	Bikaner (Rajasthan)
4	Indian Institute of Crafts & Design	1995	Training, Design, Knowledge, Research	Diverse	Across India
5	Craft Revival Trust	1999	Research, Documentation, Policy Advocacy	Diverse	Across India
6	Adivasi Academy	1999	Revival, Design, Indigenous Knowledge	Diverse	Across India
7	Industree Foundation	2000	Livelihood, Micro Enterprises, Market Access	Diverse	Across India
8	Fair Trade Forum - India	2000	Capacity Building, Design, Market Training	Diverse	Across India
9	Banglanatak	2000	Research, Documentation, Capacity Building, Market Access	Diverse	Across India
10	Digital Empowerment Foundation	2002	Digital Capacity Building	Textiles	Across India
11	Jaipur Virasat Foundation	2002	Knowledge, Documentation, Research, Outreach	Diverse	Across India
12	All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association	2004	Policy Advocacy, Research, Design, Enterprise Skills	Diverse	Across India
13	Vimor Foundation	2004	Conservation, Documentation, Livelihood	Textiles	Across India
14	Khamir	2005	Capacity Building, Market Access, Innovation, Research	Diverse	Kutch, Gujarat

Sl. No	Name	Year of Establishment	Thematic Area	Material	Impact Area
15	Okhai	2008	Design Development, Market Access	Textiles	Mithapur, Gujarat
16	Commitment to Kashmir	2011	Design, Market, Capacity Building	Diverse	Kashmir
17	Somaiya Kala Vidya	2014	Artisan Training – Business and Design	Textiles	Kutch, Gujarat
18	Startup Oasis	2014	Business Mentoring, Incubation	Diverse	Across India
19	Craftizen Foundation	2014	Skill Development, Business Mentoring, Market Access	Diverse	Across India
20	Handloom School	2015	Artisan Training – Design and Enterprise	Textiles	Across India
21	Kalhath Institute	2017	Artisan Training – Design	Textiles	Lucknow
22	Antaran	2018	Livelihood Programmes, Market Access	Textiles	Across India
23	Nila House	2019	Research, Conservation, Revival	Textiles	Across India
24	Raah Consulting	2020	Market Access	Textiles	Across India
25	Creative Dignity	2020	Market Access, Capacity Building, Cataloguing	Diverse	Across India
26	200 Million Artisans	2020	Knowledge, Research, Partnerships	Diverse	Across India
27	Crafts Council of Weavers & Artisans	2020	Policy Advocacy, Documentation, Market Access	Diverse	Rajasthan
28	Catalyst AIC	2020	Business Mentoring	Diverse	Across India
29	The Baradari Project	2020	Online Fundraising	Textiles	Across India
30	Connecting For India	2020	Market Access International	Textiles	Kutch, Gujarat

5.2. Appendix 2

The survey and interviews of non-profit organisations in the crafts sector covered the following information areas:

A. Organisation Profile

(Name, Year of Establishment, Nature of Intervention, Thematic Areas)

B. Impact of COVID-19

(Operations, Adaptation Strategies, Risk Mitigation)

C. Response Initiatives

(Relief, Supply Chain, Market Access, Nature of Response, Collaboration)

D. Sectoral Shifts

(New Practices, Shifts in Operations, Recovery, Resilience)

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