

How Papier Mache Artisans Struggle to Preserve and Conserve Their Indigenous Craft

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This is part three of a three-part series undertaken by Visual Storyboard initiative of Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), Jindal School of Liberal Arts, O.P. Jindal Global University. Read part one [here](#) and part two [here](#).

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Many artists in states across India are deeply concerned about the future and the preservation of traditional handicrafts as they witness a decline in interest among the younger generation to take over the process of work in producing these while

maintaining the authenticity and purity of the craft's indigenous production process.

As modernisation and globalisation have taken centre stage, traditional crafts have experienced a loss of prestige and financial viability. Young people, influenced by changing societal norms and career opportunities, are increasingly choosing to pursue other professions that offer higher earning potential and greater social recognition.

This shift in career choices poses a significant threat to the survival of traditional crafts, as the knowledge and skills passed down through generations could be lost forever. To counter this trend and secure a future for their craft, many artisans have taken it upon themselves to initiate various programs and initiatives aimed at engaging and inspiring the younger generation.

Ahmed Khan, an experienced exporter of the *papier mache* products, expands on this problem by discussing how the state does little to provide better access to domestic and cross-border markets for such unique products:

“To give you an example of our difficulties, a shipment of ours has been stuck at the borders of the Netherlands for the past week. The officials there say it's due to the absence of the VAX number, which I applied for a month ago. There has been no help from the government's end to help, instead, I have been making rounds to their offices in vain. Usually, it is supposed to take 10 days to arrive, and currently, despite the delay, we are not being offered any updates. Now, it would've been different if this shipment were just about me and my needs, but it's not. I have a huge number of artists working under me whose households depend on the payment from this order. How am I supposed to provide them with money when I don't have it myself?”

The last generation of *papier mache* artists

The exploitative nature of the relationship with exporters and the rising cost prices of the products gives more reasons for the younger generation to move out of the age-old tradition of *papier mache* art. In the face of these vulnerabilities, there is a rising shortage of expertise as there are very few people with indigenous knowledge of the art remaining in the business.

As Saad* explains in detail, “Although the demand for *papier mache* products has remained consistent, the supply has drastically reduced due to the dwindling number of artisans. While the prices of these products have not increased, the cost of raw materials has risen. Consequently, although *papier mache* products command a high price in the market, the artists themselves are unable to meet their basic needs. Many artisans have been compelled to switch to other professions to make ends meet.”



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/2tYXRiKZRZI>

The social isolation endured by this community of artisans not only affects their social interactions but also has an impact on their overall health and well-being. As the low earning potential associated with this craft serves as a major deterrent for the younger generation, the artisans continue to yearn for a more lucrative solution to their problems.

The other issue that affects craftsmen and artisans is the nature of restrictions faced by them in accessing a direct marketplace for their work, mediated by a standard benchmarking process which embraces the authentic craft over those that imitate or counterfeit its production process.

This means that the artists have to deal with 'intermediaries' to facilitate selling of such products. This, in turn, has had the effect of a reduced level of autonomy in the production process for the artists.

Parvaiz explains, "To adapt to market trends, I introduced drawing papier machie designs on iron, glass, and stainless steel products. Artisans working on these new materials are able to earn a satisfactory income, while those who remain dedicated to the original papier machie work are often dissatisfied."

Working on tighter timelines and producing bulk orders for the international market means that artists who can deliver on such schedules have to sacrifice quality in favor of quantity.

Even the designs of the artworks are now dictated as per the customer preferences, who reside in international markets such as Europe, shifting the products from an expression of their cultural identity to ornaments meant for traditional Christian festivals like Christmas. While such orders are useful for sustaining their lives, artists rue that such changes have reduced the agency of the artists from their art.



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The detrimental effects of the loss of cultural capital in a rich kaleidoscopic knowledge and handicrafts capital of Kashmir are profound and far-reaching. Rapid commercialization and mechanization of traditional art forms have led to a decline in authenticity and cultural identity. As machines take over the production process, artisans lose their bargaining power, resulting in reduced compensations and limited training opportunities for future generations.

The erosion of cultural knowledge and expertise has weakened artistic skills, leading to a loss of India's unique cultural heritage. Moreover, the decline of traditional art forms has had severe economic consequences for the livelihoods of artisans and communities dependent on these crafts.

Additionally, the decline of cultural tourism and educational impact further accentuate the need to preserve and revitalise traditional art forms. To safeguard India's cultural capital, concerted efforts are necessary to recognise, support and promote these invaluable art forms, ensuring they continue to enrich the nation's cultural fabric for generations to come.



In preserving the crafts, papier mache artists are making efforts to teach the young about the craft's rich indigenous and cultural history which instills a sense of pride and appreciation for their craft among young people -learning the work. They organise workshops, training sessions, and interactive events to showcase the beauty and significance of traditional crafts. Educational institutions can do more to promote these in partnership with papier mache handicraft workshop organisers.

By offering hands-on experiences and sharing stories about the cultural heritage behind each craft, they hope to reignite interest and curiosity among the youth. In addition to educational efforts, some artists are also exploring ways to make traditional crafts more relevant to contemporary tastes and demands. They are experimenting with modern designs, incorporating sustainable practices, and utilizing innovative marketing strategies to attract a wider audience, including the younger generation.

Despite the artists' commendable efforts, one major hindrance in their mission to preserve traditional crafts is the lack of significant support from the government. While some local and regional authorities may show interest and offer limited backing, a cohesive and nation-wide approach is lacking. Without substantial government support, it becomes challenging to scale up these initiatives, reach a larger audience, and provide better infrastructure for skill development and training.

The government's involvement is crucial in creating an ecosystem that fosters the preservation and promotion of traditional crafts. Financial assistance, policy incentives, and infrastructure development can go a long way in encouraging young people to pursue careers in traditional crafts. Furthermore, incorporating traditional crafts into educational curricula can help raise awareness and appreciation among the youth.

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