



INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL
ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

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**“INVISIBLE HANDS BEHIND INDIAN HERITAGE:
LABOUR RIGHTS AND EXPLOITATION OF TRADITIONAL
ARTISANS IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY.”**

AUTHORED BY - AISHWARYA S

Course: B.B.A. LLB (Hons)

VIT School of Law

ABSTRACT

The place of traditional crafts in the socio-economic and cultural life of India is unique, as this industry is not only the heritage of art but also a longstanding system of qualified manual labour. Although Indian handicraft scholarship tends to emphasize aesthetic traditions or heritage conservation, only less attention has been given to the labour conditions of these craftspeople who maintain handicraft traditions in the country. This paper discusses the artisans as the members of informal labour economy in India and assesses the degree to which the vulnerabilities of such artisans are tackled by the current labour law frameworks. The approach of placing artisan production into the wider context of discourse about informal labour can be used to understand the impact of market structures, supply chains and networks of intermediaries on the economic realities faced by craft workers.

The study is based on theoretical research on labour informality, craft economies and socio-legal studies to examine the structural aspects that cause marginalisation of artisans. It also compares laws like the Unorganised Workers Social security act 2008 and the Code on social security 2020 to determine whether the existing legal frameworks are providing the necessary response to the needs of the traditional craft workers. The paper also talks to constitutional jurisprudence, especially judicial interpretation of the right to livelihood in cases like the case of *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*, to seek the normative basis of labour protection of the vulnerable workers.

As the study connects the issues of cultural production and labour rights, it suggests that artisans should not only be regarded as a custodian of the heritage but should be viewed as an employee with a more aggressive legal instrument and policy basis. This can only be achieved by such recognition so that the preservation of the cultural heritage is done without

compromising on the economic justice of the artisans who create the art.

1. INTRODUCTION

The cultural phenomenon of India has traditionally been influenced by an extraordinary heritage of handcrafted arts created by the community of skilled artisans. These artisans are not only forms of aesthetic expression but also elaborate networks of labour, transmission of skills and economic activity based on the community. In various parts of the country, customary families still manufacture culturally important items with both historical and marketable interests. An example of such continuity is the use of traditional crafts like Thanjavur Thaluyatti Bommai, Madhubani Painting and Pattachitra Painting where artisans have passed the knowledge on through a system of apprenticeship and family training. Among the researchers of labour organisation in India, the focus has been drawn to the fact that artisanal production used to be an inseparable part of the rural and small-scale economic system in the past.¹

Although these crafts are both culturally and economically important, the working conditions of the artisans are mostly precarious. A large section of the artisan labour force is engaged in the informal or unorganised sector, where the process of production is typically done at household level, cottage level or communal based networks and not in a formally regulated industrial facility. These types of production are often typified by sporadic incomes, absence of written contracts of employment, and very little access to institutional cushions like a social security or labour welfare relief. Industrial and Social change Studies of industrial and social change in India have indicated that the workers involved in small-scale and craft-based production are in many cases left out of the formal labour protections as a result of the fragmented nature of their employment relationship.²

These are also circumstances that have been coined by historical social hierarchies that shape the occupational structures in the traditional labour systems. Socio-legal studies have shown that these caste and class relations have in the past dictated access to resources, labour opportunities and economic mobility in most artisanal professions in India,³ and thus despite

¹ Jonathan Pattenden, *Labour, State and Society in Rural India: A Class-Relational Approach* (Manchester Univ. Press 2016).

² Richard D. Lambert, *Workers, Factories, and Social Change in India* (Princeton Univ. Press 1963).

³ Rupa Viswanath, Rethinking Caste and Class: Labour and the “Depressed Classes,” 59 *Int’l Rev. Soc. Hist.* 1 (2014).

the continued recognition of traditional crafts as an Indian cultural heritage the artisans who craft these products are mostly economically vulnerable and institutionally vulnerable.

It is against this background that this paper analyses the traditional artisans as actors in the wider informal labour market in India and determines the level at which the contemporary labour law frameworks are effective in addressing the socio-economic susceptibility of the traditional artisans. Through examining cultural meaning of craft production and legal frameworks that regulate informal labour, the paper will be aimed at investigating whether or not current protections of labour have any purpose in terms of applying to artisan communities.

2. CULTURAL HERITAGE AND STATE-WISE ARTISAN TRADITIONS

The craft traditions of India are not just the product of the artistic tradition but are historically ingrained systems of labour that have defined the regional economies and the social organization. The history of traditional crafts is the development of the system of guilds and caste occupations and localized production networks over centuries. The cultural value of these crafts cannot be separated with their contribution to a rural economy, where they generated more than **64.66 lakh artisans in India** and many of them operate on a labour-intensive type of economic activity that maintains regional identities and local markets.⁴

A. Traditions in the Textile and Weaving.

1. Kanchipuram Silk Saree -Tamil Nadu.

Kanchipuram silk saree is one of the most ancient traditions of Indian weaving. The craft originated in the temple town of Kanchipuram, where weaving groups were patronized by the **Chola and Vijayanagara dynasties** and provided textiles to religious ceremonies in the temples and the royal courts. Its manufacture process is characterized by very intricate interlocking methods that incorporate the mulberry silk and zari strands and need the extremely skilled hand labour.

In Tamil Nadu, there are thousands of weaving families today who are relying on the Kanchipuram silk industry to make their living. Protection is also achieved using **Geographical Indication (GI)** tag which safeguard authenticity yet boosts regional economic growth. But it is also noted that there is growing competition among artisans against machine

⁴ Ministry of Textiles, *Handicrafts at the Heart of India's Rural Economy* (Press Information Bureau, Dec. 9, 2025).

produced synthetic sarees that mimic the traditional patterns at much cheaper rates thus jeopardizing the existence of the handloom workforce.

2. Banarasi Brocade - Uttar Pradesh.

Another textile tradition that is historically important and has its origins during the Mughal era is Banarasi silk weaving in **Varanasi**. The art blossomed through the support of the Imperialism, and a mixture of the Persian design style with the local weaving of fibres affected the art. The Banarasi brocades have been defined as having extensive use of gold and silver zari work on handlooms, which involves not only a level of artistic work but also a lot of manual labour.

The industry has structural challenges yet it has had a worldwide acknowledgement. It is reported that the majority of weaving families deal with the loss of their incomes and the lack of predictable demand which are the symptoms of more general labour vulnerabilities in the informal sector of the Indian craft. This case study of the Banaras weaving community therefore demonstrates that crafts which were once so economically privileged in the labour markets in the past are still rather vulnerable in the current labour markets.

B. Painting and Visual Crafts Traditions

1. Madhubani Painting – Bihar

Madhubani is a type of painting that is practiced by rural women of the **Mithila region of Bihar** and was traditionally used to represent ritual wall paintings during festivals and marriages. Gradually, this art shifted to house walls to paper and canvas, and artisans were able to enter commercial markets.

Madhubani painting has now been an international recognized art form which has given a source of livelihood and especially to the women artists in Madhubani. The prevalence of the female workforce in the craft industries is indicative of a larger trend in the Indian handicraft industry, where women form more than **56 percent of the artisans**, indicating the relevance of the sector to the participation of gendered labour.⁵

2. Pattachitra -West Bengal and Odisha.

Pattachitra painting is a pre-historic narrative tradition of art that is connected with the temple culture, especially with the **Jagannath Temple of Puri**. These paintings were traditionally

⁵ Economic Survey 2024-25 (India), cited in *Over 50% of India's Artisans Are Women*, Econ. Times (Feb. 2025).

done on cloth or dried palm leaves by artisans as a representation of mythological tales and religious themes.

It is made by using natural dyes, handmade brushes and detailed elaborate work which takes a lot of skill and time. Though the craft holds great cultural significance, most of the Pattachitra artisans are also economically unstable because of their unstable marketability and the growing popularity of the mass-produced decorative art.

C. Metal and Craft-Based Artisan Industries.

1. Sarthebari Bell Metal Craft -Assam.

The Sarthebari metalwork of Assam is among the oldest metalwork in India. The craft revered in historical times to make utensils and ceremonial objects, involves melting and hammering alloys of **bell metal** by hand.

This craft cluster illustrates the way that artisan communities are localized forms of labour in which knowledge is passed on across generations. Yet the emergence of stainless steel and factory-made utensils has greatly diminished the consumption of the traditional bell metal products which had an impact on the livelihood of the artisan families.

2. Bidriware – Karnataka

Bidriware Bidar in Karnataka is a unique metal craft that is characterized by the complex silver inlay on blackened zinc alloy surfaces. The craft emerged in the **Bahmani Sultanate era**, and it is influenced by the Indo-Persian.

Engraving, inlaying and chemical oxidation are all to be used in production and it is very labour-intensive. Though artistically advanced, the industry is still based on small household units that have little access to institutional credit or formal labour protection.

D. Wood, Sculpture, and Decorative Crafts

1. Channapatna Wooden Toys -Karnataka.

Channapatna toy industry or as commonly called the Toy Town of India has a history of its existence that goes way back to the eighteenth century and was promoted by the patronage of Tipu Sultan. All these toys use soft ivory wood and plant-based dyes, an example of a sustainable practice that uses local materials.

During the recent years, the craft has been rediscovered with governmental efforts and the GI protection, but still artisans struggle with the problem of low-cost plastic toys and massive mass-producers.

2. Thanjavur Thaluyatti Bommai -Tamil Nadu.

A traditional handicraft of Thanjavur region of Tamil Nadu, the Thanjavur Thaluyatti Bommai, or **dancing doll**, is a type of handicraft. These are hand-made dolls which have bobbing head mechanism, and are mostly used as decorative items in festivals like **Navaratri Golu**.

Small artisan families usually practice the craft and are dependent on the demand and the local markets that are usually seasonal. Despite its cultural importance, the industry depicts the unstable economic status of the artisans who operate beyond the confines of formal labour laws.

E. Economic and Labour Significance of Craft Traditions.

One of the biggest employers in rural India is still the traditional craft industries. The handicrafts industry is estimated to have a workforce of approximately **70 lakh artisans** and craftsmen, and it is one of the largest labour-intensive industries in the country, following agriculture⁶, with exports of handicraft total **₹33,122.79 crore** in **2024-25** demonstrating that the global market shows a great interest in Indian handmade products.

The diversity of craft is also remarkable, with more than **318 GI-tagged handicraft** products and about **455 recognised craft categories**, showing the level of specialisation of the regions throughout the country.⁷

3. ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION OF ARTISAN LABOUR

Artisans in the traditional context have a lot of contributions to the Indian cultural economy but their work is undervalued economically. Although the craft products produced by artisans are of high value and are usually priced at a high value both in the local and international market, the artisans usually receive a minimal share of the market value. Higher levels of labour exploitation do exist as a result of structural characteristics of the craft economy, including networks of intermediaries, informal production and sanctions, and restricted access to capital.

A. Relying on Intermediaries and Middlemen.

The domination of middlemen and traders in the supply chain is among the key sources of economic exploitation in craft industries. The artisans are often deprived of direct access to

⁶ Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises, *Handicrafts Sector Employment Statistics* (2023).

⁷ Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, *Handicrafts Sector Overview and Export Data 2024-25*.

urban or world markets and have to depend on middlemen who buy the goods at a very low price and resell at an extremely high profit. This system enables the traders and the exporters to enjoy most of the profits as the artisans earn subsistence wages.

The research on the Indian craft cluster points out that artisans frequently get **only 20-30 percent** of the final market value of craft products, and the rest of the value is captured by wholesalers, exporters, and retailers in global supply chains.⁸ The lack of direct market connections thereby supports unequal economic relations between producers and commercial intermediaries.

B. Informal Structures of Employment and Weakness in the Protection of Labour.

The majority of crafts production in India is done under **informal and home-based** labour where many labour laws do not apply. Workers have an infrequent access to institutional benefits like minimum wages, health insurance cover, or pensions, since artisans usually have none.

According to estimates by government, more than **90 percent of the total employment in India is located in the informal sector** with a large proportion of the artisan group being employed in cottage industries or household sectors.⁹ The structural informality does not give the artisan group the opportunity to pursue legal redress or collective bargaining rights in situations of unfair wages or exploitative employment terms.

C. Limited Bargaining Power and Lacking Organisation.

Lack of good labour organisation in the craft industries is another reason which has led to artisan exploitation. It tends to produce such small households scattered in many places instead of centralized workplaces and collective bargaining is not easy. Due to this, artisans are left at the mercies of traders or contractors who determine prices and terms of production.

The rural labour relations have shown that workers involved in the informal production systems often have very weak bargaining power because of the disaggregated nature of employment

⁸ Jan Breman, The Informal Economy and Labour Exploitation in India, 44 Econ. & Pol. Wkly. 29 (2009).

⁹ International Labour Organization, Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture (3d ed. 2018).

and the lack of unions or cooperatives to arbitrate on wages or conditions working¹⁰. Artisans are at a disadvantage of economic marginalization without the institutionalised means of doing so.

D. Global Supply Chain Integration.

Export networks are increasingly helping the Indian handicrafts to enter the global markets, though the artisans themselves are seldom proportionately gaining out of this growth. Based on government trade statistics, the handicraft exports of India have been estimated at about **33,122 crores in 2024-25**, which indicates a high demand of the products of the traditional craft across the world.¹¹

Nonetheless, involvement in the international markets tends to strengthen the existing disparities. Export production often is cost-efficient and large-volume-oriented, which in turn may lead to a drop in the wages of artisans and a rise in the reliance on commercial agents.¹²

E. Structural Inequality on the basis of Caste, Sex and Class.

The historical social hierarchies also determine economic exploitation in craft industries. The socially marginalized caste communities which comprise many artisan communities had their occupations related to hereditary craft labour in the past. Such structural inequalities have persisted to affect access to education, capital and market opportunities.

Inequality between the genders makes workplace labour issues more complex in the craft sector. More than half of the artisan labour force in India is made up of women, though they are more likely to get lower payments and are still usually confined to production at home with little economic presence to be observed.¹³

4. ARTISANS WITHIN THE INFORMAL LABOUR ECONOMY

Artisan labour in India makes a part of the larger informal labour economy which predominates in the rural and semi-urban areas. Informal workers are typified by intermittent payment, non-existence of contracts and absence of social security protection. These structural factors have

¹⁰ Jonathan Pattenden, Class Relations and Rural Labour, in *Labour, State and Society in Rural India* (2016).

¹¹ Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, *Handicrafts Export Data 2024-25*.

¹² Thomas Chambers, *Networks, Labour and Migration Among Indian Muslim Artisans* (2020).

¹³ Economic Survey of India 2024-25.

a great influence on the artisans who work under a non-centralized and home-based production system.

A. The Indian Informal Employment Scale.

The labour market in India is largely informal. National labour statistics show that about **93 percent** of the Indian labour force is in the informal sector which includes agricultural labourers, domestic workers, street vendors and artisans.¹⁴

In this context, the handicrafts industry alone employs more than **70 lakh artisans** and craftspeople in the country, and it has thus been one of the most significant sources of non-agricultural rural employment.¹⁵

B. Home Based production and cottage industries.

The artisan production is usually done in the home-based workshop or small cottage industry where members of the family work together in the manufacturing process. Such decentralized production systems minimise overhead expenses but they do not allow the artisans to be recognised as formal employees.

This means that a good number of craft workers are not entitled to the statutory labour protection of minimum wage or workplace safety. The scholars claim that craft production is household based, and the line between domestic labour and wage labour is blurred, which complicates the regulation intervention.¹⁶

C. Lack of Attractiveness to Social Security and Welfare.

The employees in the informal sector do not usually enjoy social security provisions such as pensions, medical insurance and unemployment checks. To the artisans, this lack of institutional support leads to the long-term economic insecurity.

Even though there are government programs like the National Handicraft Development Programme and artisan welfare programs aimed at helping them, they are very sporadic and unevenly spread in different places. Consequently, several craftsmen use seasonal demand and

¹⁴ Jan Breman, *The Informal Economy: A Challenge for Labour Law*, 46 *Econ. & Pol. Wkly.* 42 (2011).

¹⁵ Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises, *Handicrafts Sector Employment Statistics* (2023).

¹⁶ Richard D. Lambert, *Workers, Factories and Social Change in India* (1963).

fluctuating market conditions to earn their livelihoods.¹⁷

D. Informality as a Structural Labour Problem.

According to the view held by scholars of labour economics, informality should not be perceived as an absence of regulation only but as a structural aspect of developing world labour market. The informal networks of production usually develop based on the past trends involving the organization of rural labour, scarce industrialization, and unequal capital access.

In that sense, artisan labour is an important illustration of how culturally important types of labour may be left marginal in an economically disadvantaged state. It is essential to understand the relationship between craft production and informality for evaluating whether modern labour law framework address the needs of traditional artisan communities.

5. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROTECTION OF ARTISAN LABOUR

At the informal and unorganised labour group, traditional artisans find themselves in large numbers and protection of them relies on the statutory frameworks that expand labour welfare beyond formal sector of employment. The Indian legislature has in the recent years tried to fill this gap by means of social security and wage bills. Nevertheless, even with these legal frameworks many artisans still find themselves beyond the real protection of the law through structural obstacles of non-registration, disjointed systems of production, and inadequate knowledge of welfare initiatives.

A. Protection under the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008

The **Unorganised Workers Social Security Act 2008** was passed to give social security benefits to workers operating in the informal sector, home based workers, self-employed workers as well as wage labourers who are not in formal employment arrangements. The central and state governments have power under the act to introduce welfare programs to life and disability insurance, health benefits, maternity benefits, and old-age protection.

The artisans who practise traditional crafts are usually categorised under the definition of unorganised workers under the Act since their labour is usually done either in the form of a household or a small-scale production network as opposed to a registered industrial

¹⁷ Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, *National Handicrafts Development Programme Guidelines* (2022).

establishment¹⁸. The government estimates the number of unorganised sector workers to be more than **400 million**; however, only a significant number of them are registered under welfare schemes, which implies that a good number of artisan workers do not receive the benefits that the legislation envisions.¹⁹

B. Social Security Code on Social Security, 2020.

Trying to unify the legislation on the welfare of labour, the Indian Parliament adopted the Code on Social Security, 2020, which includes several laws on social security in a single system. The categories of unorganised workers, **gig workers and platform workers** are specifically identified in the Code, thus broadening the area of social protection mechanisms.

The bill allows it to create both national and state-levels social security boards to recommend welfare plans to informal employees. In theory, these provisions should be useful to artisans working in traditional crafts due to the access to health insurance, pension schemes, employment injury benefits²⁰, but scholars have noted that these schemes all rely on the ability to identify and digitally register workers, neither of which is widespread in rural craft communities due to low literacy levels and limited administrative reach.²¹

C. Wage Protection by the Code on Wages, 2019.

The **Code on Wages, 2019** provides a legal platform on the issue of minimum wages, payment of salaries on time, and elimination of wage discrimination in all areas of employment. The Code is a bid to establish a universal minimum wage, both to organised and unorganised labour.

However, decentralization of craft production presents realistic challenges on enforcement. Most artisans do not work under employees but as instead, they work as independent producers, making it difficult to apply the mechanism of wage regulation. Literature related to informal labour market shows that workers in the home-based industries tend to be paid in a piece rate that is well below the minimum wage levels in the country, especially in industries like weaving, embroidery, and metal crafts.²²

¹⁸ Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, *Annual Report 2023–24*.

¹⁹ Jan Breman, *The Informal Economy: A Challenge for Labour Law*, 46 *Econ. & Pol. Wkly.* 42 (2011).

²⁰ Code on Social Security, No. 36 of 2020, India Code.

²¹ International Labour Organization, *India Wage Report 2018*.

²² Jan Breman, *The Informal Economy and Labour Exploitation in India*, 44 *Econ. & Pol. Wkly.* 29 (2009).

D. Constitutional Defence of the Right to Livelihood.

In addition to the statutory labour laws, constitutional jurisprudence also helps to protect the artisan workers. The judiciary has applied the **Article 21 of the Constitution of India** to incorporate the right to livelihood and hence giving the constitutional protection to the workers whose livelihood relies on their labour.

In **Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation** ruled that the right to livelihood is under the right to life under Article 21, which meant that any form of deprivation of livelihood would essentially be denying people their means of existence, especially artisan communities whose life attribute is their prime source of living.²³

E. Judicial Recognition of Labour Dignity.

The Indian courts have reiterated on the value of labour and the necessity to safeguard the vulnerable workers. In **Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India**, the Supreme Court acknowledged that the state had the duty of removing the exploitative labour laws and providing human working conditions.²⁴ The Court considered that the non-payment of minimum wages is forced labour in Article 23 of the Constitution, which is held in **People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India**.²⁵

All these judgments provide a constitutional basis of safeguarding employees involved in the informal sectors like the traditional crafts. Nevertheless, effective ways of applying these judicial principles into effective protection of artisan labour remains a notable policy challenge.

6. GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION PROTECTION AND ARTISAN WELFARE

Having the traditional crafts, they are not only labour-intensive economic activities, but also products that are culturally unique and related to specific parts of India. Indian law acknowledges the idea of geographical indications (GI) to preserve the identity and authenticity of such products in terms of which the goods are associated with a particular place of origin.

²³ *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*, (1985) 3 SCC 545.

²⁴ *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India*, (1984) 3 SCC 161

²⁵ (1982) 3 SCC 235.

A. Legal Framework for Geographical Indications.

The **Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999** provides a legal framework of protection of products that can be said to have a certain quality or reputation because of a specific geographical origin. GI registration helps manufacturers in the particular area to reform against misuse of the merchandise name by other parties.

As of 2024, India has registered over 450 geographical indication products, most of which are in the handicrafts segment.²⁶ This protection would help to maintain traditional knowledge systems, as well as stop imitation by large-scale manufacturers.

B. Artisan Crafts which are GI-Protected.

A number of conventional crafts created by the artisan communities have been recognized under GI. **Kanchipuram Silk Saree** is a famous GI product because of its unique weaving process and historical connection with the temple town of Kanchipuram. Likewise, the **Sarthebari Bell Metal Craft** is an example of millennium-old metallurgy by artisans on their families in Assam.

These GI tags assist in preserving the originality of local products and enhancing their reputation in the market both at the home country and overseas.²⁷

C. GI Protection: Ineffectiveness in the Welfare of Artisans.

Although GI registration helps offer protection to products identity, it does not necessarily ensure better economic status of artisans. Researchers have noted that GI certification has been taken over by exporters, traders or even large cooperatives and not by individual craft producers.

In fact, artisans are often paid meagre wages even when the GI products are sold at a high price in the market. Thus, even though GI product protection is beneficial in the long run for the culture, it is not beneficial in terms of the issues faced by the artisans.

²⁶ Geographical Indications Registry, Government of India, *GI Registered Products List 2024*.

²⁷ Dev Gangjee, *Relocating the Law of Geographical Indications* (Cambridge Univ. Press 2012).

7. POLICY GAPS AND LEGAL REFORMS FOR PROTECTING ARTISAN LABOUR

Artisan labour in India still exists in serious structural problems despite the presence of statutory protections and welfare schemes. Although labour laws and other cultural protection mechanisms recognise the relevance of traditional crafts, loopholes of application, coverage and enforcement restrict the effectiveness of the legal systems. To eliminate these shortcomings, policy reforms are necessary, which would combine labour welfare and cultural preservation.

A. Gaps in Identification and Registration Artisan Workers.

The second key challenge that faces the expansion of labour protection to artisans is that workers in the craft sector are not systematically identified and registered. Majority of the artisan communities exist in the household-based production systems, and thus the communities are hard to trace using the traditional labour databases.

The handicrafts sector alone employs over **7 million artisans** all over India, but as the government estimates, a significant number of them could not be registered in welfare systems which were implemented by labour legislation including the Code on Social Security, 2020.²⁸

B. Limited Digital Inequality and Market Access.

The other problem that artisan communities have encountered is lack of access to the markets, especially the digital and international markets, where artisan products are able to fetch a premium price. Technology is not yet accessible to many artisans because of their lack of technical knowledge, online payment methods and the infrastructure they need to operate in the virtual market.

Indeed, according to recent government statistics, although India has **reached 33,000 crore export** of its handicrafts in 2024, little percentage of individual artisans are directly involved in the export chain, where most of the activities are mediated by traders and exporters.²⁹

²⁸ Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, *Annual Report 2023–24*.

²⁹ Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts, *Handicrafts Export Statistics 2024*.

C. Strengthening Cooperative Models and Collective Bargaining.

The researchers have proposed that producer organizations and artisan cooperatives can be very instrumental in enhancing labour conditions in the craft sector. Cooperative structures enable the artisans to negotiate prices together, get raw materials at a reduced cost as well as create direct market connections with the consumers.

Such institutional models have been successful in other industries like handloom weaving,³⁰ and by expanding institutional models can effectively increase the stability of income and at the same time maintain such traditional crafts in separated production networks.

D. Combining Cultural Policy and Labor Welfare.

The contemporary policy frameworks have a tendency to separate the policy concerns of cultural heritage protection and labour welfare. But to have a long-term maintenance of the traditional crafts, a more holistic method would be needed that acknowledges the artisans as not only custodians of culture but also as economic participants.

The policy reforms may thus be focused on specific programs in welfare, skill development, and financial aid programs that are specifically meant to cater to the artisan communities. This not only would help to preserve cultural heritage, but would also help to make artisans have a fair economic reward with their labour.³¹

8. CONCLUSION

The traditional crafts show one of the long-term forms of labour in the Indian socio-economic history. Through the generations, artisan communities have retained exclusive expertise that is part of the national culture and the economy diversity of the country. These crafts are a fusion of artistry and mastery and community cultural memory, as seen in textile weaving and metalwork, painting and pottery.

But, even with their value to the culture and the market, the artisans remain vulnerable to structural economic vulnerability. Their work is mostly located in the informal sector where they lack formal contracts, social security provisions and bargaining power, which predisposes

³⁰ Jonathan Pattenden, *Labour, State and Society in Rural India: A Class-Relational Approach* (Manchester Univ. Press 2016).

³¹ Glenn Adamson, Thinking Through Craft, 43 *J. Design Hist.* 1 (2013).

the workers to precarious earnings and unhealthy market connections. Craft production frequently finds that most of the profits made by the intermediary-dominated supply chains are taken with the artisans remaining with a low percentage of the finished market value.

The Indian labour law has started to appreciate the need to offer welfare to the workers who are not under the formal employment structure. **The Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008, Code on Social Security, 2020, and the Code on Wages, 2019** are some of the legislative frameworks used to expand the area of labour protection to informal workers. The law further has strengthened the notion that the dignity of labour and right to livelihood should be safeguarded to all workers, including those working in traditional crafts by judicial interpretations of the constitutional rights.

Mechanisms like the geographical indication protection have also preserved the cultural identity of the craft products at the same time by associating them with certain regions. Although these legal instruments help to protect authenticity and prevent faking, they do not necessarily result in better economic situations of artisans themselves. This emphasizes the necessity of having policies that promote **the preservation of culture and labour welfare at once.**

In the end, sustainability of craft heritage in India is not just the issue of safeguarding of traditional designs or regional identities but it is also the issue of providing fair and noble working conditions to the artisans who perpetuate the traditions. It is also important to realise that by acknowledging artisans as labourers within the wider context of labour rights, the social justice and continuity of cultural practices is ensured.