



Traditional Indian Crafts

A Historical Perspective

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Abstract : This article traces the historical trajectory of traditional Indian craft production from the archaeologically documented bead- and shell-working economies of the Indus Valley Civilization through the political and economic transformations of the colonial period to the contemporary institutionalization of craft heritage through geographical-indication law. Drawing on archaeological, economic-historical, and legal scholarship, the article argues that Indian craft production has, across this long historical arc, been repeatedly caught between its function as a livelihood for artisan communities and its symbolic mobilization by external political and commercial actors - colonial administrators seeking evidence of economic backwardness, nationalist reformers seeking symbols of self-reliance, and contemporary intellectual-property institutions seeking to formalize cultural heritage. The article concludes that this recurring tension between symbolic recognition and substantive economic benefit for artisans should inform the design of contemporary craft policy.

IndexTerms - Indian crafts; Indus Valley craft production; colonial deindustrialization; geographical indication; artisan heritage; history of craft

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Indian crafts occupy a distinctive place in the historical record: they are among the oldest continuously documented productive traditions in the subcontinent, with material evidence extending back to the Indus Valley Civilization, and they remain today a significant source of livelihood, cultural identity, and, increasingly, legal protection through the instrument of geographical indication. This article examines the historical trajectory of Indian craft production across three broad periods - the archaeologically documented craft economies of the Indus tradition, the political and economic transformation of craft production under colonial rule, and the post-independence effort to preserve and institutionalize craft heritage through legal and developmental instruments. The aim is not to catalogue individual craft forms but to trace the changing relationship between artisanal production, political authority, and cultural meaning across this long historical arc.

2. CRAFT PRODUCTION IN THE INDUS TRADITION

The archaeological record of the Indus Valley Civilization provides the earliest substantial evidence of organized craft specialization in the subcontinent. Ethnoarchaeological research on stone bead manufacture at Khambhat in Gujarat, correlated with excavated material from Indus sites, documents a highly developed craft technology involving the cutting, drilling, and polishing of semi-precious stones such as carnelian, alongside the working of shell, faience, and metal, with evidence for some techniques extending back to the

sixth and seventh millennia BCE along the coasts of Gujarat, Sindh, and the Gulf region ¹. This bead-making tradition was not an isolated craft but part of a wider system of specialized production integrated into regional and long-distance trade networks, since finished carnelian beads produced through Indus techniques have been recovered as far afield as Mesopotamia.

Excavations at Harappa further indicate that craft production was spatially organized within the urban fabric of Indus cities, with distinct locations associated with particular crafts such as bead-making, shell-working, seal-carving, and metallurgy, and with these locations bearing an identifiable relationship to broader patterns of urban civic organization ². This evidence suggests that, from the earliest period for which material evidence survives, Indian craft production has been characterized by a high degree of technical specialization and social organization, features that would recur, in transformed institutional guises, across the subsequent history of Indian artisanal production, including in the guild structures of the classical and medieval periods.

3. COLONIAL RULE AND THE POLITICS OF CRAFT

The relationship between craft production and political authority was transformed decisively under colonial rule. Economic historians have documented the structural changes that colonial trade and taxation policy imposed on Indian textile and craft production over the course of the nineteenth century, as India's role in the global economy shifted from that of a major exporter of finished textiles toward that of a supplier of raw materials and a market for machine-manufactured British goods, with significant, though historiographically contested, consequences for the employment and livelihoods of traditional artisans ³. Comparative work on colonial textile markets similarly traces how the introduction of factory-produced cloth altered the competitive position of handloom weavers across different regions of India in uneven and locally variable ways over this period ⁴.

Beyond this economic transformation, Abigail McGowan's study of craft development initiatives in western India between 1851 and 1922 demonstrates that crafts became, over this period, a central site of political contestation between colonial administrators and Indian nationalist activists, well before Gandhi's khadi movement popularized hand-spun cloth as a symbol of national self-reliance. McGowan documents how colonial art and industrial schools, model factories, and craft exhibitions positioned artisanal production simultaneously as evidence of India's economic backwardness in colonial administrative discourse and as a resource for national economic and cultural revival in nationalist discourse, such that debates over the future of Indian crafts became, in practice, debates over the future of the country itself ⁵. This dual coding of craft -

¹Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, Massimo Vidale, and Kuldeep K. Bhan, "Contemporary Stone Beadmaking in Khambhat, India: Patterns of Craft Specialization and Organization of Production as Reflected in the Archaeological Record," *World Archaeology* 23, no. 1 (1991): 44-63.

²Heather M.-L. Miller, "Associations and Ideologies in the Locations of Urban Craft Production at Harappa, Pakistan (Indus Civilization)," *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 17, no. 1 (2007): 37-51.

³Tirthankar Roy, *The Economic History of India, 1857-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴Tirthankar Roy, ed., *Cloth and Commerce: Textiles in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996).

⁵Abigail McGowan, *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

as backwardness to be corrected and as heritage to be preserved - persisted well beyond the colonial period and continues to shape contemporary craft policy.

4. POST-INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND LEGAL PROTECTION

In the decades following independence, the Indian state moved to institutionalize the preservation and promotion of traditional crafts through dedicated boards, cooperative structures, and export promotion mechanisms, consolidating a policy approach that had its roots in the late-colonial craft-revival initiatives McGowan documents. A more recent development in this institutional history is the extension of intellectual property protection to traditional craft products through the geographical indication mechanism introduced under India's Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act. Empirical research on the implementation of this mechanism finds that handicraft products account for the majority of geographical-indication registrations in India, reflecting the scale and regional specificity of the country's craft economy, while also documenting that many artisan communities remain only partially aware of the legal protections available to them and have derived limited direct commercial benefit from registration to date ⁶.

Scholarship examining this legal-institutional turn frames geographical indication as an instrument that operates simultaneously to protect the commercial value of specific craft products and to formally recognize the traditional knowledge embedded in their production methods, but cautions that treating geographical indication purely as an intellectual-property mechanism, without corresponding investment in artisan capacity and market access, risks leaving the interests of craft-producing communities inadequately served even as the legal recognition of their heritage expands ⁷. This tension between formal cultural recognition and substantive economic benefit for artisans echoes, in a contemporary legal register, the earlier colonial-era tension McGowan identifies between crafts as objects of preservationist admiration and crafts as a livelihood requiring active economic support.

5. CONCLUSION

The historical trajectory of traditional Indian crafts, from the specialized bead- and shell-working economies of the Indus tradition through the politically charged craft-development debates of the colonial period to the contemporary geographical-indication regime, reveals a recurring structural tension between craft as a source of livelihood for artisan communities and craft as a symbol mobilized by external political and commercial actors, whether colonial administrators, nationalist reformers, or contemporary intellectual-property institutions. Understanding this long historical arc is a necessary precondition for craft policy that seeks to serve the interests of artisan communities themselves, rather than merely the symbolic or commercial interests of the institutions that have, across successive historical periods, sought to speak on craft's behalf.

⁶Ruchi Chaudhary, "Geographical Indications in India: A Case of Handicraft Industry in Uttar Pradesh," *The Journal of World Intellectual Property* 25, no. 4 (2022): 671-689.

⁷"Crafting Identity: Geographical Indications and the Legacy of Indian Artisanal Crafts," *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts* 5, no. 5 (2024).

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