

# Decolonization of the Indian Arts and Crafts Industry

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## Abstract

The 'British Raj' is known by all. It was a period during which the British had direct rule over the Indian subcontinent from 1858 up till 1947 i.e., when India and Pakistan gained independence. Previous studies have shown how colonization has dire impacts on the colonizes from an economic, social and even cultural perspective. This stands true even in the case of India. More specifically, however, there were certain industries which were more impacted than the others. In line with the aforementioned, this research paper conducts an in-depth study of the Indian arts and crafts industry to uncover its brilliance and how the British colonized it. The latter half of the paper evaluates the policies and initiatives that have been implemented by the Indian government and ministries, since 1947 to date, to understand how effective these have been in decolonizing the Indian arts and crafts Industry

**Keywords:** Indian Arts & Crafts Industry, British Rule, Decolonization, Policies

## Introduction

The nobodies: nobody's children, owners of nothing.  
The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodies, running like rabbits,  
dying through life, screwed every which way.  
Who don't speak languages, but dialects.  
Who don't have religions, but superstitions.  
Who don't create art, but handicrafts.  
Who don't have culture, but folklore.  
Who are not human beings, but human resources.  
Who do not have names, but numbers.  
Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the  
police blotter of the local paper.  
The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them.  
*-Eduardo Galeano*

Beginning with the poignant verses of the poem, "The nobodies: nobody's children, owners of nothing. The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodies, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way," we are compelled to reflect upon the marginalized and voiceless. They are people who do not speak languages but dialects, who do not have religions but superstitions, and who do not create art but handicrafts. These are individuals who have been historically relegated to the periphery, seen as mere

human resources, identified not by names but by numbers, and largely invisible in the annals of world history, only appearing in the local police blotter. These are the nobodies, people not considered worth the bullet that kills them.

In India, the arts, crafts, and handloom sector play a vital role in representing a country's rich heritage and contribute to its everyday aesthetics and GDP. When discussing the arts, crafts, and handloom industry of India, it is important to recognize its diverse facets. It encompasses ornamental and decorative objects that, while utilitarian, have served the upper echelons of Indian society. Simultaneously, common potters, weavers, and other makers of non-artistic crafts have been categorized as part of the mere village industry. Crafts, as Jaitly argues, are the very "wheels of the economy," deserving serious attention rather than condescending patronage, romanticized projection, or apologetic discount support (Jaitly, 2005).

In the context of India, particularly, this industry dates back to 3500 BC and is one that has faced several challenges, particularly in light of British rule. Whilst efforts have been and continue to be made to revive this industry to what it once was, a survey revealed that 64% of respondents believed the demand for indigenous products has been on the decline over the years, with the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns exacerbating this trend. There is a real concern that, in the next 50 years, certain crafts and craftspeople may vanish. In light of the aforementioned, this research paper aims to answer the question **“To what extent have India's policies and initiatives contributed to the revival of its traditional arts, crafts and handloom sector?”**

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of the arts, crafts and handloom industry of India from its ancient origins through the medieval era, the period of British colonial rule, and the subsequent industrial revolution. The discussion culminates in a contemporary examination of its gradual decline and the ongoing discourse on its preservation.

### **Literature Review: The Origins and Evolution of the Indian Arts and Crafts Industry**

India is a veritable gold mine of artistic legacy due to its rich and diverse cultural tapestry. India's artistic expressions can be found everywhere from the lush jungles of the east to the arid stretches of the west and the northern peaks of the Himalayas to the southern shores of the Indian Ocean. These traditional art forms include a wide range of detailed carvings, colorful paintings, exquisite embroidery, painstaking printing, and a multitude of handicrafts that are uniquely regionally influenced.

Millions of people from all around India are employed in the decentralized arts and crafts sector although there is a need now to preserve traditional craftsmen's knowledge and abilities as a way to revive a green sector which will help the country's sustainability index and its economy through trade which has been ancient practice proven by archaeological evidence all around the world (Khan, 2022). For example, archaeological evidence, such as pottery and deities of Hindu gods, discovered in Vietnam show signs of trade with India during prehistoric times (Hayton, 2022).

Artistic expressions such as the exquisite Mithila paintings, Rajasthani Roghan paintings, Parsi and Todda embroidery, puppetry and handicrafts from Assam and Nagaland, Dhokra craft, and numerous others are endangered (Mahapatra, 2019). Even traditional art is gradually disappearing. Because the next generation

lacks the patience and diligence to continue the craft, those who practice these crafts fear that this generation may be the last to carry it on as these crafts have been practiced for many generations. In addition, they receive far less money than they merit for their diligence and abilities. Thus, artistic mediums must be revitalized and publicized in urban areas with the help of a literature review which explores the origins of this industry and traces its growth and transformation through time.

The history of India's arts, crafts and handloom sector is inextricably linked to the history of trade, in particular, the widespread trade of goods obtained on the back of atrocities and those capable of shaping our entire monetary system. In *Tracking the Trade Winds*, it was of seismic importance of fabrics, paintings, handicrafts and more in connecting civilisations, enriching empires and facilitating the migration of people and resources. The origins of the Indian arts and crafts industry can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization (2500–1750 BC), arguably the world's first urban culture. Archaeological discoveries such as terracotta toys, pottery, and intricate beadwork reveal early artistic prowess and commercial trade, mostly through maritime routes from East to West, the most famous one being the Silk Route (Possehl, 2002). It is a substantial contribution to the advancement of Indian civilizations and a testament to the importance of arts and crafts in the social and economic fabric of ancient India - according to Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy (2009), the production and trade of Indian arts & crafts led to the development of a strong intra-Asian network that eventually became a "global network"

During the Vedic period (1500–500 BC), the arts and crafts in India centered around religious and utilitarian needs. Textiles were woven using cotton and wool, while pottery ranged from simple to sophisticated forms, often decorated with geometric patterns. Metalwork saw the creation of weapons, ritualistic vessels, and ornate jewellery, reflecting a high level of skill (Marsh, 2021).

With the rise of the Maurya and Gupta empires (322–185 BC), the craftsmanship became more intricate. The Mauryan period is renowned for the grand stupas at Sanchi, adorned with detailed carvings depicting scenes from Buddha's life (Sudarshan, 2015). The Gupta period (320–550 AD) is often referred to as the "Golden Age" of Indian arts, marked by advances in sculpture and the fine arts, seen in the Ajanta cave paintings and the delicate iron pillar in Delhi.

The medieval period (c. 500–1500 AD) ushered in Islamic influences, transforming Indian arts and crafts. The synthesis of styles gave birth to Indo-Islamic architecture, exemplified by Humayun's Tomb and the Red Fort (Chadha, 2021). Persian-inspired miniature paintings became prevalent, as seen in the pages of the Mughal emperor Akbar's "Akbarname." In textiles, the period is known for luxurious silk and cotton fabrics, often embellished with gold and silver threads (zari), giving rise to famous styles like the Banarasi saree.

During colonial rule (c. 1757–1947), Indian textiles gained immense popularity in the West, with chintz, muslin, and calico being highly sought after for their fine quality and intricate designs. This period also saw the emergence of Company paintings, a style that blended traditional Indian techniques with European sensibilities (Britannica, 2018). However, the colonial period also led to the decline of traditional crafts due to competition from machine-made goods, causing a significant shift in the livelihoods of Indian artisans.

In the beginning, India's skill in producing natural dyes, metal and woodwork, ivory and bone crafts, pottery and papier-mâché, closed a large knowledge gap in the West. Due to limitations in resources and expertise, Western artisans were unable to replicate the vivid and durable hues found in Indian textiles. As a result, India's textile imports into Britain increased dramatically. But instead of being a celebration of India's superiority in textiles, it signalled the start of exploitation of Indian craftsmanship and reliance on it for the growing British textile trade.

Indian art and craft had become more influential than just a means of trade by the late seventeenth century. India's richly patterned and dyed textiles revolutionised European countries like England, France, and the Netherlands when they started to appear. Even though chintz fabrics and Indian motifs came to represent wealth and prestige in Europe, it's important to remember that this appeal was based on a shallow admiration that frequently lacked comprehension or regard for the cultural significance of these patterns.

As the European market developed, the relationship between Indian artisans and British traders underwent additional changes. Astute East India Company officials and merchants realised the enormous potential of customised designs to suit European tastes, and they started directing the production of textiles such as the palampore (Medium, 2019). This was not merely an evolution of trade; it heralded a troubling period in which Indian craftsmen found themselves at the mercy of British commercial interests. They were gradually reduced from being trading partners to being little more than gears in a massive colonial machine.

The establishment of factories by the East India Company along India's coastlines intensified the effects of colonisation. Craft communities moved significantly and concentrated as a result of these establishments. Although this might appear to be a concentration of skill, in practise it upset regional artisan customs since artisans had to continually adjust to the demands of far-off European markets.

The 19th century saw significant modifications to traditional crafts. Certain crafts underwent complete transformations in response to the demands and pressures of colonisation. For example, the Patua artists of Orissa and Bengal, who were formerly renowned for their distinctive paintings, developed into masters of block printing and woodcutting, giving rise to the unique Kalighat Art.

However, the British Industrial Revolution had perhaps the most devastating effect of colonisation on the Indian arts and crafts sector. Indian goods, made with traditional methods, couldn't compete against mass-produced, steam-powered machine goods and were, therefore, directly threatened by the cheaper, faster, and more mechanised textiles produced in Britain's factories. This led to a severe decline in industries like cotton weaving and spinning, silk and woollen textiles, and others. This imbalance was made worse by policies such as the 1813 imposition of high taxes on Indian textile imports. The data from the period presents a startling image: Indian cotton exports saw a sharp fall between 1814 and 1835, while British cotton exports to India skyrocketed (NCERT, 2011). The introduction of railways further accelerated this decline, as British goods reached even remote villages, disrupting rural artisan industries. This 'deindustrialization' led to the collapse of industrial towns like Surat and Dacca (Perlin, 1983). Overall, data shows that India's industrial output, which was about 25% of the world's total in 1750, plummeted to just 2% by 1900 (DurdaĜ, 2012). Many artisans, unable to find alternative employment due to the lack of

modern industry growth, were forced to turn to agriculture as tenants, sharecroppers, or labourers, exacerbating poverty.

In conclusion, although at first, it appeared that Indian arts, crafts, and textile industries would benefit from British colonisation, a critical analysis reveals a trajectory marked by exploitation, disruption, and eventual decline. To decolonise this sector, the intervention of the government and key ministries was and continues to be necessary.

The remainder of this research paper aims to conduct a thorough analysis and evaluation of the key policies and initiatives that have been implemented with regard to the arts and crafts industry of India since gaining independence up till now. The section will be supported by secondary research and the main aim is to understand if these policies and initiatives have successfully decolonized the industry or not.

### **Discussion: Key Policies and Initiatives to Decolonize and Revitalize the Arts and Crafts Industry of India Post-Gaining Independence**

The hard reality faced by the newly independent republic in 1947 was a stagnate and de-industrialized economy left by the British Raj, committed to the nationalistic emphasis on self-reliance. Policymakers predicted its regeneration based on five-year plans, assessing and prioritizing development needs and accordingly allocating capital outlets to decolonize.

The underground situation of the art's craft sector was described after independence in 1951 in the first plan, stating "As one that has been decaying and the rural population, which constitutes about 83% of the total, suffering from chronic underemployment and low incomes" (Sethi, 2019). In parallel, the policy direction left no room for ambiguity, it was stated that "for the revival of village industries these crafts which have suffered much, will deserve special attention" (Winter, 1975). The plan focused on 8 developmental aspects - sectoral reorganization, credit availability, access to raw materials, tools and equipment, technical guidance, skill enhancement, welfare, sales and marketing, and an emphasis on research, all set under the umbrella of protective fiscal and regulatory policy. Policymakers squarely recognized that the craft and arts sector represented not only an invaluable cultural tradition but also an economic force impacting development and GDP. The plan documents continue to reiterate this rule, this sector is not to be viewed as a static part of the economy, but rather as a progressive and efficient decentralized sector which is closely integrated on the one hand with agriculture and on the other with large-scale industry (Aggarwal et al., 2015). With adjustments and modifications, the eight core developmental aspects remain central to crafting policy over the decades.

As an outcome of the five-year plan- Establishment of the All India Handicrafts Board (1952) took place, which was formed to promote and develop handicrafts, handlooms, and village industries across India, focusing on the formulation of policies aimed at developing craft practices and addressing issues faced by artisans. Even though the beginning of independence policy focus was more on the handloom industry wherein the government hoped to "revive" the sector through the Handloom Reservation Act (1947), which was one of the earliest policies to protect handloom weavers by reserving certain designs for exclusive handloom production, it was soon released that handicrafts need its own division, although both falling under the ministry of textile. Under the direction of eminent Indian social and political activist

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Pupul Jayakar established the Handicrafts Board as a single entity. In 1953, the board was divided into divisions focused on handicrafts and handlooms. While handloom textiles were included in the latter category, special weaves, block prints, embroidery, and decorative textiles like zardozi and brocades were included in the former. All India Handicrafts Board played a crucial role in addressing “the problem of design development” (NCERT, 2011) in rehabilitating the handicraft industry but even though craftsmen required assistance with new design ideas to suit the taste of consumers in India and abroad, there was no standardized way of regulating new design assistance. The government dissolved the board in 2020 stating, “the need for systematic rationalization of government bodies” (Firstpost, 2020)'. After two centuries of colonial policies that had led to its decline, this marked the beginning of the arts and handicrafts industry's recovery, reestablishing India's prominence as a leading exporter of arts and crafts.

But beyond policies, some special instruments and projects were out of the usual policy limits. Some were never replicated, like the establishment of the Craft Museum in Delhi in 1972 and the 1980s decade-long festival of India and its concomitant development activities while others were absorbed within the system to be exponentially amplified. For example, the founding of design institutes, which now crisscrossed the country with the NIDs (National Institute of Design) and 18 NIFTs (National Institute of Fashion Technology), forever changed the landscape of design for crafts. The establishment of Dilihat in 1984, which provided a permanent space for craft performances and cuisine, marked a significant development. Over the years, this concept has been replicated and expanded. Other than these in 1962, the Handicrafts and Handlooms Export Corporation of India (HHEC) came into existence, which is an offshoot of the Indian State Trading Corporation. The Corporation's strategy for direct exports was created to create new products that would satisfy international consumer demand as well as expand existing markets. Furthermore, India has a large voluntary organization called the Crafts Council, which is affiliated with the World Crafts Council and has branches in many states. However, despite the decades-long censuses conducted, a notable gap remained: there had yet to be a comprehensive census on the number of craft practitioners. This omission continued to be a puzzling aspect in the documentation and understanding of the craft sector. The numbers varied from official 7 million to 200 million (IBEF, 2021).

However, the developments that were being made, stalled to a great extent in the 1990s, when the Indian economy was faced with huge fiscal and budgetary deficits, a foreign exchange crisis and a host of other challenges. In response, national priorities were overhauled, and structural changes were enacted from liberalized market reforms to the opening up of the economy. All are reflected in planned documents from 1992 onwards. The policy now advantaged urban orientation and industrialization over the rural and the handmaid while continuing to be acknowledged for its cultural underpinnings and its huge employment potential, the process of declining budgetary allocations for the crafts had commenced and by the start of the 21st century, the craft sector had been relegated to policy backwaters. These shifted goalposts were echoed in its financial allocations in national accounts in figures

In order to further comprehend the intricate dynamics of India's crafts industry, we must broaden our perspective. While the Ministry of Textiles is primarily in charge of craft administration, policies impacting craft have not been ring-fenced or contained within its administration; they are part of a larger matrix. Over 15 central ministries shape the craft policy landscape through various instruments such as

regulations, fiscal measures, and international conventions, ranging from external affairs and culture to tourism and the environment ministries, for instance, the 1999 Geographic Indication Act (Bhairappanavar, 2015). By providing intellectual property rights for place-based crafts, this legislation not only safeguards the unique artisanal knowledge and skills inherent to different states of India but also enhances their economic viability. Over 60% of place-based craft rights now fall under the protection of this Act, which is a significant stride toward recognizing and valuing the artisanal diversity that is integral to the Indian arts and crafts sector. This empowerment through legal recognition ensures that the benefits of the crafts' commercialization return to the local communities, fostering sustainability and pride in India's artistic legacy.

Moreover, India's cultural heritage and craft practices receive international recognition and protection through instruments like the Cultural Heritage Convention (Bhattacharya, 2022). The exquisite Tiaras of Jandiala Guru have gained acknowledgement as a heritage of humanity, alongside the craft traditions linked to 13 other Indian nominations. Furthermore, the inclusion of Jaipur as a city of craft in UNESCO's Creative Cities Network is a testament to the global influence and esteem of Indian crafts (Philip, 2023). Such international recognitions not only celebrate but also help preserve and stimulate the traditional knowledge, skills, and economic activities of Indian artisans, thereby bolstering the industry on both a domestic and international stage.

From an economic perspective, the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on crafts and handlooms has streamlined tax processes but also added a burden on artisans unfamiliar with complex tax systems. Conversely, the New Companies Act of 2013 mandates companies to allocate 2% of their net profit towards Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which has brought significant investment into the crafts sector from larger corporations. These policy shifts have had profound effects on the Indian crafts landscape, presenting both challenges and opportunities for growth, innovation, and collaboration between traditional artisans and modern businesses.

But to the here and now, to be a seemingly anti-reflection point, as just in the last 12 months, there have been pronouncements that precede a changing future for cross-policy. To prove this, it's important to take into account some new developments, which move closer to the demonizing of the arts and craft sector in India. The first one begins with the G20 New Delhi leaders' declaration on 10 September (Economic Times, 2023) a growing example of cultural diplomacy. The impact of these lies in the small print as the very definition of the cultural and creative sectors and industries has been widened to include community-based craft, and other arts as one of the 12 declared categories. The first statement to notice is an acknowledgement of the economic significance and societal value of the cultural and creative industries. The next statement is on leveraging and adopting digital technologies and frameworks for the protection, promotion and development of cultural and creative industries. The third statement is focused on intellectual property protection of living heritage with regard to the impact of its over-commercialization and missed appropriation. The rule out of action on these declarations is still awaited.

The second announcement was on 17 September 2023 by the PM Vishwakarma scheme with a budget of Rupees 13,000 crores- a spend across 18 trades, of which 13 are craft categories (Deshpande, 2023). What is fascinating is that this scheme has been housed under Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, one of the

ministries on the list of 15. This ministry is not new to crafts, as it already administers the activities of spinning, weaving and marketing, and of the village industries. While it's too early to foretell these policy futures, many will be tracking developments. However, governments are not impermeable or impervious to suggestion and those working in the craft ecology can impact policy, ensuring that it keeps in step with expectations, or when out of step with the interests of the community it is meant to serve, it can work towards influencing a course correction.

The most recent announcement, following the G20 summit, India is poised to further showcase its arts and crafts sector by organizing "Bharat Tex 2024," which is being touted as the largest textile event globally from February 26 to February 29, 2024, in New Delhi (ANI, 2023). The event's international scope promotes cross-cultural exchanges, potentially leading to a reevaluation and greater appreciation of Indian arts and crafts on a global scale, which can be pivotal in undoing the homogenizing effects of colonization.

### Conclusion and Future Scope

This research paper has traced the intricate and multifaceted history of India's arts and crafts sector, from its ancient origins and the impact of British colonization to post-independence efforts to decolonize and revitalize this vital industry. The journey of Indian arts and crafts is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of its artisans, as well as a story of cultural and economic significance. India embarked on a path of reclamation and rejuvenation following independence, with a slew of policies and initiatives aimed at restoring the dignity, economy, and global stature of its traditional arts and crafts.

Policy shifts from the first Five Year Plan to the recent Vishwakarma scheme reflect an ongoing evolution and understanding of the sector's needs. The inclusion of the arts and crafts sector in broader economic and cultural policies, international recognition, and recent initiatives such as the G20 New Delhi leaders' declaration demonstrate an ongoing commitment to preserving and promoting this rich heritage. On the other hand, the challenges of modernization, globalization, and balancing traditional practices with contemporary demands remain. The upcoming "Bharat Tex 2024" event represents a significant opportunity for India to showcase its arts and crafts on a global platform, potentially leading to a renaissance in appreciation and demand for these traditions. This research highlights the necessity of continuous policy evolution and international collaboration to ensure the survival and flourishing of Indian arts and crafts, emphasizing the critical role of these traditions in the cultural and economic fabric of India.

Further research on this topic area may entail researching a country that fits similar parameters to India in having a significant arts, crafts and handlooms industry, having been colonized historically and now being recognized as an emerging or developing country. The researcher may seek to uncover policy initiatives focusing on the decolonization of the arts, crafts and handlooms industry which have been pursued successfully and extend such findings to India.

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