

From Handicrafts to High Fashion: Mapping India's Artistic Trade Footprint in the Global Luxury Economy

Dr. Neha Agarwal

Assistant Professor, GitaRattan International Business School, Rohini, Delhi

Abstract

India's rich heritage of handlooms and handicrafts has increasingly become a strategic asset in the global luxury fashion economy. This paper examines the growing collaboration between Indian artisans and international luxury brands, India's position in the global handicraft and textile export market, and the role of government schemes in supporting indigenous craftsmanship. Using a descriptive research design based on secondary data drawn from the Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts (EPCH), the India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), the Press Information Bureau (PIB), and other government and industry sources, the study finds that Indian designers such as Rahul Mishra, Sabyasachi Mukherjee, and Gaurav Gupta have earned significant international recognition, while global luxury houses including Dior, Louis Vuitton, Christian Louboutin, and Stella McCartney have incorporated Indian craft techniques such as zardozi, mukaish embroidery, and Khadi into their collections. The study further identifies the United States and the United Arab Emirates as India's leading export destinations for handicrafts and textiles, and examines the 2025 controversy surrounding Prada's Kolhapuri-inspired sandals as a case study in cultural appropriation, Geographical Indication (GI) protection, and equitable brand-artisan collaboration. The paper concludes that with continued policy support, stronger GI enforcement, and ethical global partnerships, India's handicraft and textile sector is well positioned to strengthen its role in the global luxury economy. As the analysis relies entirely on secondary data, primary research involving artisans and brand representatives is suggested as a direction for future study.

Keywords: Indian Handicrafts; Luxury Fashion; Geographical Indication (GI)

1. Introduction

India possesses a rich and diverse heritage of handlooms and handicrafts. Almost every state, region, and village takes pride in its own handmade craft or loom, passed down through generations, sustaining both cultural continuity and community bonds among artisans.

Handicrafts are products made by hand using basic tools and traditional techniques that reflect craftsmanship, culture, and regional identity. They are typically produced from natural raw materials such as wood, stone, metal, fibre, and recycled materials, and include items such as woodware, hand-printed textiles, embroidered goods, imitation jewellery, pottery, glassware, attars, and agarbatti.

For decades, the handloom and handicraft sector has supported the rural economy, functioning alongside agriculture as one of the largest sources of employment in both rural and urban India.

The sector is predominantly driven by women, who account for 56% of the total artisan population (PIB, 2022). India is home to 744 registered handicraft clusters, employing 212,000 artisans and producing over 35,000 unique handcrafted products.

The handicraft sector is an integral part of India's cultural economy, employing approximately 3.5 million artisans (Deb et al., 2022; IBEF, 2024) and contributing to a market valued at approximately ₹35,964.5 crore in 2023. Over the last decade, India's handicraft exports have grown steadily from ₹7,870 crore in FY2011 to ₹32,759 crore in FY2024.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To study the collaboration between local artisans and luxury brands.
2. To examine the major export destinations for Indian handicrafts and textiles.
3. To study government schemes that promote indigenous handicrafts.

3. Literature Review

Saha and Giribabu (2024), in "Handicraft Sector in India: Overview of Production and Export Potentiality," provide a comprehensive analysis of India's handicraft sector, noting that handicrafts worth ₹32,758 crore were exported in 2023-24, with the USA accounting for 40.85% of total exports. The study also identifies a strong correlation between handicraft production and export volume.

Nisha (2023), in "Revival of Traditional Crafts: Case Studies from India and South East Asia," examines a range of traditional crafts including textiles, weaving, pottery, and metalwork, and identifies key factors contributing to craft revival across the region.

Research Gap: While existing literature documents the economic scale of India's handicraft sector and case studies of craft revival, there is limited academic work examining how individual artisan-brand collaborations with global luxury houses translate into export growth, and how India's Geographical Indication framework performs when tested by real-world cases of alleged cultural appropriation, such as the 2025 Prada-Kolhapuri controversy. This paper addresses that gap by combining export trend analysis with a contemporary case study.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive research design based entirely on secondary data. Data was collected from the Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts (EPCH), the India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), the Press Information Bureau (PIB), and academic sources indexed on Google Scholar and ResearchGate.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Reconfiguring Handicraft Heritage: India's Strategic Positioning in the Global Fashion Economy

Indian fashion designers have made a substantial impact on the global stage, from red carpets to prestigious fashion weeks, through exquisite craftsmanship and intricate embroidery combined with contemporary design. A new generation of designers challenging traditional silhouettes and fabric choices has further strengthened this global appeal. The fusion of traditional motifs, embroidery, and textiles with contemporary design has captured the attention of Hollywood celebrities and fashion audiences worldwide.

Table 1. Global Recognition of Leading Indian Designers

Designer	Achievements	Global Impact	Collaborations
Rahul Mishra	First Indian designer at Paris Haute Couture Week; recipient of the International Woolmark Prize (Shah, 2024)	Recognised internationally for 3D embroidery and sculptural silhouettes; described as a "national treasure"	Dior, Chanel, Maison Margiela, Schiaparelli (Misra, 2020)
Sabyasachi Mukherjee	Sabyasachi x H&M "Wanderlust" collection sold out within minutes of launch (Dayle, 2021)	Widely acclaimed by fashion critics and enthusiasts (Sujata, 2025)	H&M, De Beers Forever Mark, Starbucks, Christian Louboutin (Today, 2025)
Gaurav Gupta	Second Indian designer at Paris Couture Week; invited to French Fashion Week; honoured with 'Future of Couture' and 'Cosmopolitan Designer of the Year' titles	Signature wave-sculpted gowns worn by Beyoncé, Cardi B, Mindy Kaling, and Aishwarya Rai at Cannes	—

Source: Compiled from cited news and industry reports.

Interpretation

Table 1 shows that the international fashion world is increasingly celebrating Indian craftsmanship. Rahul Mishra became the first Indian designer to showcase at Paris Haute Couture Week, demonstrating that traditional techniques remain globally relevant. Similarly, Sabyasachi Mukherjee's heritage-inspired collection with H&M sold out within minutes of launch, and Gaurav Gupta's signature sculptural gowns have been worn by Beyoncé, Cardi B, Mindy Kaling, and Aishwarya Rai at Cannes. These achievements are not merely personal successes for individual designers; they represent India's arrival on the world's most prestigious fashion stages.

Table 2. India's Craftwork in Global Luxury Fashion: Tradition Meets Modernity

Brand / Collaboration	Designer	Craft & Technique Used	Global Context
Christian Louboutin (Schmidt, 2017)		Footwear featuring zardozi and hand embroidery	Raised global awareness and demand for Indian embroidery techniques
Dior		Lucknow mukaish embellished embroidery coat	Showcased Indian metallic thread work at Paris Fashion Week
Louis Vuitton with Studio Mumbai (Bijoy Jain)		Handcrafted trunks and hand-painted sets by an Indian architect	Acclaimed globally as "unapologetically bold," fusing traditional craft with contemporary design

Brand / Collaboration	Designer	Craft & Technique Used	Global Context
Dior in collaboration with Chanakya (embroidery atelier)		Traditional hand embroidery	Raised global awareness of India's luxury embroidery market
Stella McCartney		Khadi — hand-spun, hand-woven fabric	Eco-friendly fabric showcased in a sustainable fashion collection

Source: Compiled from cited news and industry reports.

Interpretation

Table 2 illustrates the collaboration between international designers and Indian artisans in exploring craftsmanship and intricate hand embroidery. Christian Louboutin worked with Indian artisans using traditional techniques such as zardozi and hand embroidery to decorate his footwear, increasing global demand. Dior featured a coat adorned with Lucknow mukaish embroidery at Paris Fashion Week, highlighting the exquisite craftsmanship of Indian artisans. Louis Vuitton partnered with Mumbai-based architect Bijoy Jain of Studio Mumbai to showcase handcrafted trunks and hand-painted sets, which were acclaimed globally as "unapologetically bold." Stella McCartney incorporated Khadi — a hand-spun, hand-woven, eco-friendly Indian fabric — into her sustainable fashion line.

Table 3. Rise of Indian Motifs on Global Runways

Year	Global Fashion Week	Indian Motif / Technique	Highlight
2025-26	Louis Vuitton, "Paris to India"	Handcrafted trunks; runway staged as a snake-and-ladder board	Most sumptuous fashion conversation
2024-25	Dior, Paris Fashion Week	Lucknow mukaish embroidery	Metallic threads stitched into fine fabric
2023-24	Dior, Fall Collection	Aari work, appliqué, block printing	Unparalleled artistry of Indian craftsmanship
2021-22	Milan Fashion Week	Patchwork, polka dots, brocades	DIY craft projects
2019-20	Oscar de la Renta, "Spring 2019"	Banarasi-inspired intricate patterns	Described as a global phenomenon
2018-19	Pre-Fall 2018	Banarasi sarees	"Maharaja" collection

Source: Compiled from industry reports.

Interpretation

Table 3 highlights how Indian motifs have become increasingly prominent at global fashion events. In 2025-26, Louis Vuitton showcased a collection of handcrafted trunks with a runway styled as a snake-and-ladder board, under the theme "Paris to India," generating considerable fashion industry attention. Dior has repeatedly featured Indian artistry, showcasing Lucknow mukaish embroidery at its 2024-25 Paris Fashion Week presentation, following its 2023-24 collection, which highlighted the "unparalleled artistry" of Indian craftsmanship through techniques such as aari work, appliqué, and block printing. Other global brands have also drawn inspiration from India: Oscar de la Renta's "Spring 2019" collection

featured patterns inspired by Banarasi weaving, described as a global phenomenon, while the Banarasi saree itself was the focus of the 2018-19 "Maharaja" collection.

5.2 Economic Significance of the Luxury Sector for India in the Global Context

Table 4. Economic Significance of India's Luxury Sector in the Global Context

Indicator / Metric	Value / Trend	Year	Source
Global luxury goods market size	USD 395 billion	2024	Bain & Company, 2024
Projected global growth rate	2-4% CAGR (leather & jewellery: 4-6%)	2025-27	McKinsey, 2025
Economic profit vs. 2019	Nearly tripled	2024	McKinsey, 2025
Total exports (goods + services)	USD 778 billion	2023-24	PIB, 2025
Luxury product market share of total exports	15-18% (gems & jewellery, premium textile, high-quality leather, handicraft)	2023-24	FIEO, 2024
Gems & jewellery exports	USD 37.5 billion	2023-24	IBEF, 2025
Textile & apparel exports	USD 34.4 billion	2023-24	PIB, 2025
Premium handicraft exports	USD 4.1 billion	2023-24	EPCH, 2023-24
Growth rate of luxury exports	8% CAGR over 5 years	2019-2024	Statista, 2025

Source: Compiled from Bain & Company, McKinsey, PIB, FIEO, IBEF, EPCH, and Statista reports (see References).

Interpretation

As shown in Table 4, the global luxury goods market was valued at approximately USD 395 billion in 2024 and is projected to grow at a steady annual rate of 2-4% through 2027. The sector's economic profit has nearly tripled compared to 2019. Within India's broader export economy, the luxury product sector accounts for a notable 15-18% share, corresponding to an estimated USD 778 billions of total export value (PIB, 2025). This indicates that India's luxury commodities are not merely cultural artifacts but a vital contributor to the nation's economic performance. Gems and jewellery exports lead at USD 37.5 billion (IBEF, 2025), followed by textiles and apparel at USD 34.4 billion, high-quality leather products, and premium handicrafts at USD 4.1 billion, further diversifying India's luxury export portfolio.

The sector's strong performance is reflected in its 8% compound annual growth rate over the last five years (2019-2024), which significantly exceeds many conventional export sectors. This upward trend signifies not only recovery from global economic challenges but also continued expansion in international demand for Indian luxury goods. The consistent growth suggests that global consumers are increasingly recognising the authenticity, craftsmanship, and heritage intrinsic to Indian luxury products.

Major Export Destinations for Indian Handicrafts and Textiles

Table 5. Major Export Destinations for Indian Handicrafts & Textiles (2023-25)

Category	Country	2023-24 (INR Crore)	2024-25 (INR Crore)
Art Metalware	USA Germany UK	1,429.31 316.04	1,540.79 377.69
	UAE Netherlands	303.94 304.72 146.94	314.82 262.47 167.52
Woodwares	USA Germany UK	3,944.48 634.50	4,095.02 732.73
	Netherlands	453.64 678.55	465.33 714.93
Hand-Printed Textiles	UAE USA UK France	1,005.22 341.84 63.30	1,539.46 319.92 65.56
	Germany	42.25 48.24	49.32 46.26
Embroidered & Crocheted Goods	USA UK France Italy	2,093.31 192.69	2,267.22 217.73
	Australia	186.39 176.97 163.28	214.75 200.52 174.44
Overall Textile & Apparel incl. Handicraft Export Share (2023-24)	USA & EU USA, EU & UK	47% 53%	— —

Source: Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts, EPCH (2025).

Interpretation

Table 5 shows that the USA is the single largest export destination for Indian handicrafts and textiles across nearly all categories, particularly art metalware, embroidered and crochet goods, and woodwares. Besides the USA, the UAE is the largest importer of hand-printed textiles, with a significant increase in export value between 2023-24 and 2024-25.

Government Policies Supporting Indian Artisans

The Indian government supports artisans through several programmes designed to help traditional craftspeople showcase their products in the world of high fashion. The PM Vishwakarma Scheme (Government of India, 2023) provides artisans with modern tools, technical training, and collateral-free credit support, while also offering technical and financial assistance for the development of craft clusters (Government of India, 2024). The government further protects traditional crafts through Geographical Indication (GI) tagging (IBEF, 2024) and promotes the "Handicrafts of India" brand internationally.

Case Study — From Royal Feet to Global Feet: The Chappal that Challenged Prada

The Kolhapuri chappal, a handcrafted staple of Indian footwear with an 800-year-old legacy from Kolhapur, Maharashtra, was originally crafted for royal families and aristocrats. Over time, it gained widespread popularity for its intricate craftsmanship, comfort, and durability. In July 2019, the Kolhapuri chappal was granted Geographical Indication (GI) status by the Controller General of Patents, Designs & Trade Marks, in recognition of its use of superior-quality, locally sourced leather that is manually cut, stitched, and punched into an exquisite design. The GI tag provides legal protection to the artisans' knowledge across the eight districts of Maharashtra associated with these slippers, protecting cultural heritage, supporting local economies, and securing global recognition for the region's handicraft heritage. At Milan Fashion Week 2025, the Italian fashion house Prada debuted braided, T-strapped, minimalist leather toe-ring sandals that closely resembled India's 800-year-old Kolhapuri chappal. The sandals were priced at approximately ₹1.2 lakh, compared to ₹300-₹1,500 for traditional chappals. Prada initially remained silent on the resemblance and did not acknowledge the artisan community or the traditional heritage associated with the design, prompting widespread outrage and accusations of design theft. The

controversy amplified global conversation around cultural appropriation, exploitation, unfair compensation, and the unauthorised use of GI-protected designs.

Facing global backlash, Prada subsequently issued a statement acknowledging Indian artisans for their craftsmanship and confirming that the sandals were inspired by traditional Indian handcrafted footwear. The company also proposed collaborations to share cultural legacy with mutual respect, expressing willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue with local artisan communities.

In a landmark step, on 11 July 2025, Prada announced the launch of a limited-edition "Make in India" sandal collection inspired by Kolhapuri chappals, in collaboration with Maharashtrian artisans. The collection will strictly adhere to GI-tag specifications, aiming to showcase Maharashtra's craft heritage on a global platform, with a focus on fair trade practices, knowledge exchange, training, skill development, innovation, sustainability, and cross-border artisan residencies.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study is based entirely on secondary data drawn from government publications, industry reports, and news sources, and does not include primary data collection through interviews or surveys with artisans, designers, or brand representatives. The analysis of designer and brand collaborations is illustrative rather than exhaustive, and export figures are subject to periodic revision by reporting agencies. Future research could incorporate primary fieldwork with artisan clusters and a comparative analysis of GI enforcement across other Indian handicraft products.

7. Conclusion and Scope for Future Research

India's handicraft and textile sector represents not only a legacy of beauty and skill but also a strategic pillar of the country's export economy, reflecting the resilience, adaptability, and timeless appeal of its artistic craftsmanship. From the village loom to international fashion runways, India's creative spirit continues to inspire the world. With sustained policy support, innovation, and global collaboration, the future of India's artistic trade footprint appears both sustainable and promising.

As consumers, designers, and policymakers increasingly value authenticity, sustainability, and heritage, India is well positioned to lead the global conversation on ethical, artisanal fashion. What began centuries ago as handcrafted expressions of faith, culture, and identity has today become a thriving movement redefining luxury and creativity on the world stage. Future studies may build on this work through primary research with artisan communities and a deeper comparative analysis of how GI protections are enforced internationally.

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