

Handicrafts in Shaping the Livelihood of Rural Communities in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

West Bengal's unparalleled legacy in arts and crafts—as seen in architectural terracotta marvels, fine muslin and silk—stems from its village-based cottage industries and remains the backbone of its rural economy. Recent interventions have lifted artisans' average monthly earnings from ₹3,000 to ₹8,000 (Department of MSME&T,) and grown the UNESCO partnered- Rural Craft Hub from 3,000 to 25,000 beneficiaries across ten traditional crafts. The 2023 Hasta Shilpa Mela, with 59 pavilions and around 7,000 artisans, generated over ₹70 crore in sales and attracted up to 65,000 weekend visitors (Mp *et al.*, 2023). National programmes like the Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana have boosted infrastructure, training and credit support, while handicrafts now account for 8.21 percent of India's textile and apparel exports (Ministry of Textiles, 2024). Despite challenges in modernizing production and reducing middlemen margins, expanding e-commerce and direct-to-consumer bazaars point toward a more sustainable, inclusive future for Bengal's living heritage.

INTRODUCTION

West Bengal's vibrant cultural tapestry is woven through crafts like Bankura's terracotta horses and Bardhaman's dokra metalwork—more

than artifacts, these are vital lifelines for rural artisans. When agriculture offers limited income, handicrafts provide year-round employment, empowering women and

marginalized groups while preserving heritage. The annual Hasta Shilpa Mela at Eco Park showcased some 7,000 artisans in 2023, drew up to 65,000 visitors on weekends and recorded ₹70 crore in sales. Parallel efforts by the Rural Craft Hub and national schemes such as AHVY have scaled support to 25,000 artisans, offering capacity building, design inputs and market access as e-commerce platforms eliminate middlemen, handicrafts now account for **8.21 percent of India's textile and apparel exports** (Ministry of Textiles, 2024), and India's overall handicraft export market reached **₹360,937 million** in 2023 (Lobo, 2025).

Village to Global: Dhokra Art, Jute Products, Madurkathi Mats, Krishnanagar Dolls & Terracotta Tales & Beyond:

1. Panchmura's Terracotta Tale:

West Bengal's rich clay heritage is epitomized by the Bankura terracotta horse, a stylized ritual figure first crafted in Panchmura villages and now registered under GI no. 453 since 28 March 2018 (Jana, 2018). Local potters known as Kumbhakar—shape alluvial river-clay on traditional wheels and fire their wares in simple sun-heated kilns, producing everything from cooking pots to ritual figurines. In Kolkata's historic Kumortuli quarter, sculptors adapt these same techniques each autumn to mold Durga idols for local celebrations and diaspora orders bound for the US and UK.

2. Mat Making:

Reed-weaving thrives in Medinipur, where **Madurkathi** mats—made from the sedge *Cyperus pangorei*—have held GI protection (no. 567) since March 2018 and form a vital household staple in Bengal's hot, humid climate. In northern Cooch Behar, the **Shitalpati** a cooling mat woven from *Schumannianthus dichotomus* ("murta") is prized for its sweat-absorbing comfort and

intricate nakshi ("decorative") patterns. Artisans also braid palmyra leaves into fans and plait bamboo and cane into versatile baskets that serve both storage and decorative needs.

3. Dhokra Metal Casting:

The **Dhokra** metal-casting tradition employing the 4,000-year-old lost-wax process—remains alive in Bankura, Purulia, and Bardhaman districts, yielding enchanting bell-metal figures, lamps (diyas), and tribal jewellery, all cast as seamless, spiraling filigree forms. Clay cores coated in carved wax are encased in clay, baked to melt out the wax, then filled with brass or bronze to create each unique piece.

4. Clay Dolls:

Ghurni village in Nadia district is famed for its **clay dolls**, a tradition dating to the 18th century patronage of Krishnanagar's Maharajas. Artisans sculpt lifelike figures ranging from tribal characters to contemporary icons—then dress and paint them in miniature fabrics and natural pigments for display in museums and private collections worldwide.

5. Jute Products:

Finally, jute remains West Bengal's "golden fiber," woven by rural women into everything from floor mats and ropes to eco-fashion bags, carpets, and decorative tapestries. Supported by cluster-development projects under national handicraft schemes, jute artisans report income uplifts of 15–20 percent as demand grows for sustainable, biodegradable products. (Cluster Development Projects under NHDP, 2023)





Fig. 1: (a) Dhokra Metal Casting (b) Jute Products (c) Mat Making (d) Clay Dolls (e) Panchmura's Terracotta Tale

District-wise Distribution of Major Handicrafts in West Bengal:

- Bankura: Dokra, Baluchari, terracotta, wood carving, brass & bell-metal, stone

carving, bamboo, Patachitra, shell carving, lanterns

- Birbhum: Kantha embroidery, Batik, brass wares, Dokra, Sholapith, leather goods, terracotta
- Paschim Medinipur: Patachitra, bell-metal, wood carving, jewellery, stone carving, bamboo, horn craft, zari, embroidery, pottery
- Murshidabad: Brass wares, clay dolls, Sholapith, shell carving, jute, wood carving, bamboo, Kantha (...and similarly across Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Dinajpurs, Malda, Purulia, Purba Medinipur, Nadia, Hooghly, Howrah, North & South 24 Parganas, Kolkata.)



Map 1: Craftscape of Bengal: Where Every District Wears Its Art

Impact on Artisan Livelihoods through enhanced market accessibility:

A decade ago, many Bengal artisans subsisted on ₹3,000 monthly; today, concerted efforts have nearly tripled that figure to ₹8,000 on average. Under the Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana, 12,000 artisans gained direct support, yielding 5 –10 percent boosts in average income through grants, skill training, and market linkages. The textiles and apparel sector (including handicrafts) contributed

8.21 percent to India's exports in 2023–24, while global demand for artisanal products propelled India's market size to INR 360,937 million in 2023, with exports to the USA alone accounting for 37 percent (Ministry of Textiles, 2024).

Moreover, targeted promotion of Bengal's dokra craft has capitalized on rising global "handmade" trends, boosting orders by over 20 percent in export-oriented clusters (Yadav *et al.*, 2023).

CONCLUSION

West Bengal's handicraft renaissance—marked by record fair sales, soaring GI tags, and tripling of average monthly earnings—is proof that tradition and innovation can thrive in tandem. By deepening digital penetration, reinforcing community-led cooperatives, and sustaining policy support, Bengal's artisans can secure resilient livelihoods while sharing their cultural legacy with the world. The next chapter lies in empowering these craftsmen not just as stewards of heritage, but as dynamic entrepreneurs charting new paths in the global artisanal economy.

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