

# Growth and Prosperity of Handicrafts Sector of Kashmir: An Analysis from Social Security Perspective

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## Abstract

The handicrafts produced in Kashmir are renowned across the world for their excellent craftsmanship, attractive artistic designs, and functional utility. With no large-scale industries in the region, handicrafts have continued to be an important source of employment with large export potential. The sector has, however, lost its charm due to a lack of attention and organized efforts to respond to evolving market dynamics. In the absence of a strong social security mechanism, a huge chunk of the population associated with handicrafts has been struggling for support for their craftsmanship and is often vulnerable to social or economic eventualities. This scenario has enforced migration within the artisan community to different vocations and threatens to turn handicrafts into a part-time activity. This has affected handicraft exports, which have been declining in recent years. The growth and prosperity of this sector thus depend on the socio-economic well-being of the artisans and workers who tirelessly dedicate their time and efforts to creating these sustainable handicrafts. A strong social security mechanism is therefore an important investment in the welfare of these artisans and workers. It enhances production and employability and promotes inclusive and sustainable growth by ensuring decent living conditions for all.

**Keywords:** Handicrafts, Kashmir, Employment, Export, Artisan, Social Security

## Introduction

Kashmir is home to immense cultural and ethnic diversity. There are countless arts and crafts there that have been meticulously preserved over the years. The region's rich ethnocultural diversity has allowed a wide range of patterns, styles, and crafts to emerge in this land. Unique in their richness and beauty, Kashmiri handicrafts exhibit the extraordinary intricacy and skill of the Kashmiri artisans. The wealth of traditional skills is cast in indigenous crafts including distinctive wood carvings, paper-mâché, carpet weaving, shawls, crewel embroidery, copperware, basketry, etc. The creativity and expertise of Kashmir's hand-made items continue to win acclaim from across the world and fuel the region's economic progress despite the growing impact of modernity and automation.

In Kashmir, handicrafts have remained a key economic activity with a significant contribution towards employment generation and the production and export of handcrafted products. Because of the high employment base and export potential, handicrafts is the second largest and most preferred industry in the Kashmir Valley after fruit (Press Trust of India, 2013). Being a small-scale and cottage sector, handicrafts constitute an important aspect of rural and semi-rural livelihoods. It supplements incomes for millions of artisans and workers who fall, both socially and economically, into the lower strata of society. Nearly 3.5 Lakh families across Kashmir are dependent on handicrafts (Majid Maqbool, 2017). These people are mostly engaged in household industries where they earn hours of hard work for their household needs and contribute to the production of handicrafts, but not enough to maintain a minimum standard of living.

Despite its numerical strength and immense export potential, the handicrafts sector suffers from basic problems of being highly unorganized with additional constraints like lack of exposure among artisans to new technologies, illiteracy, limited capital, inadequate market linkages and market intelligence, and poor institutional framework (Dibyendu Bikash, et al. (2016)). These problems are further aggravated by a lack of adequate legal protection and due concern for the welfare of the artisans/workers with poor implementation and enforcement. The absence of a comprehensive social security mechanism is a key factor in down turning the conditions of these artisans/workers, the majority of whom are usually socio-economically disadvantaged. It undermines the workers' ability to make meaningful contributions and boost output and productivity.

Social security thus acts as a motivational mechanism for workers and inspires them to focus more on their production and services. Besides, it constitutes an important step towards the goal of a welfare state which aims to secure and advance the socioeconomic well-being of its citizens by ensuring economic equality and equitable standards of living for all (Constitution. of India, Articles: 38, 41, 42, 43 and 47).

### **Handicrafts: Meaning and Definition**

Handicrafts, often known as artisanal handicrafts, are any of a wide range of art pieces created wholly by hand or with very simple tools by skilled artisans. It is a traditional craft sector that includes a wide variety of hand-made creative and design activities, such as working with fabrics, rigid and moldable materials, paper, plant fibers, etc. Besides exhibiting the traditional techniques and distinctive expertise of artisans, handicrafts often portray the essence of culture, beauty, and rich heritage of the place where they are made.

The term 'handicrafts' encompasses a wide range of artifacts and there is no single, widely-accepted definition of the term. However, the definition adopted at United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)/ International Trade Centre (ITC) Symposium is one of the best definitions of handicrafts, taking into account more intricate factors relating to the producer, product, and process. It states that:

“Artisanal products are those produced by artisans, either completely by hand, or with the help of hand tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisans remains the most substantial component of the finished product. The special nature of artisanal products derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, creative,

culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant.” (UNCTAD/WTO (ITC), 1997).

### **Significance of the Handicrafts Sector of Kashmir**

Handicraft is a significant and prolific cum dynamic sector. The attributes like high employment potential, low per capita investment, high-value addition, participation of women and members of underprivileged social groups, environmental friendliness, and the potential for developing artistic, innovative, and creative ability makes handicrafts one of the most favoured and preferred sectors in the process of economic growth and development (Waqar Ahmad, et al. (2013)). Thus, some notable features of handicrafts industry of Kashmir include:

#### **1. Preservation of Traditional Art, Heritage, and Culture**

Handicraft heritage is a valuable cultural asset for any nation. Apart from showcasing traditional techniques and exceptional artistic expertise, handicrafts often encapsulate the essence of culture, beauty, and rich heritage of the place where they are made. Kashmiri handicrafts are a traditional art form practiced by Kashmiris and trained artists who craft and decorate various items by hand. Handicrafts in Kashmir include some vibrant hand-made crafts that symbolize the cultural significance of the region. The delicately spun and feather-soft Pashmina Shawls, intricately carved woodworks, vivid Papier mâché patterns, exquisite carpets, etc reflect the rich and fascinating culture of Kashmir. These crafts carry the magnetic appeal of the Kashmiri culture that promises exclusivity, elegance, dignity, and style.

#### **2. Low Capital Investment**

The handicrafts sector is economically viable and requires minimum expenditure and infrastructure to establish. The products are prepared manually either by hand or using simple tools. Due to minimal start-up capital, the initial cost is either negligible or low and people can start a small-scale handicraft business that can be run at home or even in small rented premises. Approximately 90% of the handicraft business is decentralized and cottage-based (UKEssay, 2017). Handicrafts in Kashmir turn every household into a production unit and every person into a producer.

#### **3. Generation of Gainful Employment**

Kashmir's handicraft industry is vital in its socioeconomic structure since it contributes to the overall growth of current and associated sectors in terms of employment and income generation. Due to the Valley's favourable topographic features, handicrafts is the second most favoured sector from a sociological perspective after agriculture. It gives its residents the chance to improve their quality of life and aids them in achieving the social and psychological needs of a sustainable life (Mansoor Ahmad, et al. (2013)). For the seasonal agricultural labour force, it is a significant source of income. (Touseef Mohi Ud Din, et al. (2014)).

The operations of the industry are generally house-hold based, wherein various members of the family collaborate in the production process. Table 1 shows a sizable portion of the valley's people employed and engaged by this extremely unorganized industry. According to the Directorate of Handicrafts, Government of Jammu and Kashmir, the handicraft sector currently offers gainful employment to nearly about 3.50 Lakh persons directly and indirectly in both urban and rural areas, with 2.50 Lakh artisans directly depending on handicrafts for a living. Most of these artisans, craftsmen, and weavers come

from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and live below the poverty line (Directorate of Handicrafts and Handloom Kashmir, n.d.). According to a study, the J&K handicraft industry employs 4-5 Lakh craftsmen and has 179 significant craft clusters, which together bring in more than a thousand Crore rupees annually (Towseef Mohi Ud Din, 2015).

#### 4. Sustaining Production and Export Trade

Handicrafts have long been the economic backbone of Jammu and Kashmir. The sector contributes significantly to the Union Territory's overall production and export. Exports of handicrafts have a direct bearing on the health of the economy of Kashmir in particular and of India as a whole Handicrafts export. Handmade items are sold throughout India and the rest of the world. J&K handicrafts were exported for 917.66 Crores in 2018–19 (State Times, 2022).

In economic terms, handicrafts add to the per capita income of the region and, as a result, to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and National Income. The sector allows the transmission of technological know-how between local skilled labour and worldwide market actors through foreign exchange (Ishfaq, 2017). The majority of Union Territories' foreign exchange profits come from this sector. Currently, handicrafts generate about Rs. 1700 Crores in foreign exchange annually (Directorate of Handicrafts and Handloom Kashmir, n.d.).

Table 1: Estimated Craft-Wise Production and Employment of the Handicraft Industry of J&K from 2010-2021

Year	Carpet		Namdah		Crewel		Wood Carwing		Paper Machie	
	P	E	P	E	P	E	P	E	P	E
2010-11	735.10	-	3.47	-	79.28	-	17.40	-	38.32	-
2011-12	776.70	-	1.58	-	-	-	62.30	-	72.70	-
2012-13	785.40	-	-	-	-	-	63.50	-	74.15	-
2013-14	686.10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	141.24	-
2014-15	739.50	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	152.25	-
2015-16	709.20	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	139.52	-
2016-17	821.50	1.11	-	-	-	-	-	-	164.30	0.14
2017-18	855.40	0.09	8.86	0.001	345.90	0.050	8.42	0.001	27.36	0.004
2018-19	392.92	0.03	0.01	0.001	330.87	0.052	15.43	0.004	14.85	0.007
2019-20	436.928	0.460	0.460	0.000	312.318	0.361	12.784	0.006	12.900	0.016
2020-21	329.523	0.527	0.527	0.050	182.675	0.346	9.750	0.008	15.920	0.024

Source: Government of Jammu & Kashmir Digest of Statistics 2020-21

(Production Value Rs in Crore ; Employment in Lakh Nos)

(-) = Not available ; (P) = Production ; (E) = Employment

Table 1 (contd.): Estimated Craft-Wise Production and Employment of the Handicraft Industry of J&amp;K from 2010-2021

Year	Fur & Leather		Chain Stich		Woolen Shawls		Other Items		Total	
	P	E	P	E	P	E	P	E	P	E
2010-11	14.40	-	79.28	-	343.10	-	340.00	-	1650.30	-
2011-12	-	-	188.33	-	520.20	-	193.55	-	1815.33	-
2012-13	-	-	192.09	-	530.60	-	197.42	-	1843.21	-
2013-14	-	-	-	-	631.20	-	559.33	-	2017.82	-
2014-15	-	-	-	-	674.25	-	609.00	-	2175.00	-
2015-16	-	-	-	-	698.05	-	687.13	-	2234.15	-
2016-17	-	-	-	-	874.50	0.10	789.70	1.40	2650.00	2.75
2017-18	3.91	0.0005	237.23	0.034	439.44	0.052	4.26	0.0007	1930.75	0.23
2018-19	0.70	0.001	-	-	611.80	0.098	11.22	0.051	1377.80	0.244
2019-20	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	413.120	0.483	80.230	0.134	1268.280	1.460
2020-21	0.000	0.007	0.000	0.091	258.790	0.850	4.046	0.061	800.754	1.917

Source: Government of Jammu & Kashmir digest of statistics 2020-21

(Production Value Rs in Crore ; Employment in Lakh Nos)

(-) = Not Available ; (P) = Production ; (E) = Employment

Table 2: Estimated Craft-Wise Direct Export of Handicraft Items of J&amp;K from 2010-2021

Year	Carpet	Namdah	Crewel	Wood Carwing	Paper Machie	Fur & Leather	Chain Stich	Woolen Shawls	Other items	Total
2010-11	412.45	8.10	77.00	36.75	-	3.10	77.00	302.00	87.70	1004.10
2011-12	567.13	-	-	57.94	138.24	-	233.60	607.03	39.43	1643.37
2012-13	455.86	-	-	69.06	620.02	-	237.61	104.11	51.62	1538.28
2013-14	551.90	-	-	-	39.96	-	-	579.72	524.07	1695.65
2014-15	492.18	-	-	-	71.70	-	-	368.20	354.96	1287.04
2015-16	293.29	-	-	-	24.85	-	-	376.79	364.48	1059.41
2016-17	369.81	-	414.11	7.50	50.36	-	-	304.05	5.29	1151.12
2017-18	452.12	4.25	200.94	4.71	14.97	2.25	123.00	284.13	3.75	1090.12
2018-19	353.63	0.05	231.61(*)	10.13	11.00	-	-	305.90	5.61	917.93
2019-20	395.78	0	236.26	9.47	9.8	0	0	271.62	12.32	935.25
2020-21	299.56	0.04	140.5	7.22	13.27	0	0	172.53	2.4	635.52

Source: Government of Jammu & Kashmir digest of statistics 2020-21

(Rs in Crore)

(\*): includes value of export under Chain stitch also

## Challenges of the Handicrafts Sector

Despite being one of the significant productive sectors with rich socio-cultural and economic value, handicrafts is suffering from some basic problems. The following are some of the challenges relating to the growth of the handicraft sector:

### 1. Unorganized Production

Handicrafts is the most decentralized sector of the Indian economy with no established enterprise and formally recognized producer bodies. The majority of crafts are produced in unorganized settings. It undermines the growth of the sector by preventing access to resources including capital, technology, large-scale raw material purchases, diverse markets, etc. Over time, more players have entered in this sector, taking advantage of its unorganized nature. This has led to an increase in the number of intermediaries dominating the industry and further exclusion of smaller artisans from fair wages and profits, increasing their plight and exploitation. Because of this marginalization, artisans remain delinked from emerging market and design trends, information on buyers, marketplaces, and consumer preferences, and lack the power to negotiate for reasonable business terms (AIACA, 2017). The sector's unorganized structure makes it even more challenging to implement comprehensive programs in an outcome-based manner to enhance artisan enterprises and institutions. The artisans continue to work under highly exploitative working conditions with unduly low wages and insufficient social security coverage.

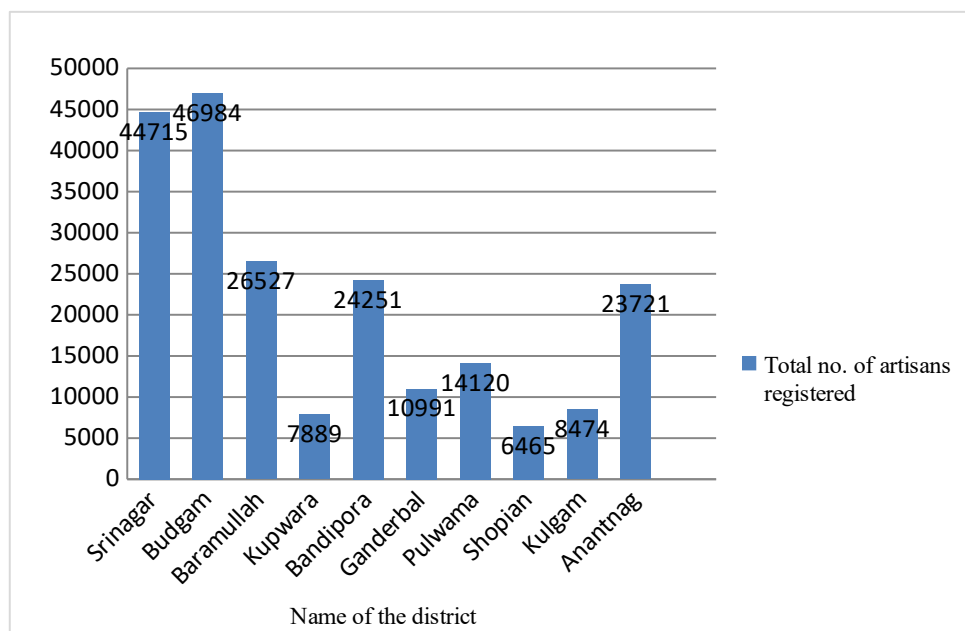
### 2. Lack of Social Security Mechanism

The unorganized nature of the sector prevents the associated artisans and workers from accessing various incentives offered under existing labour legislation. Unlike workers in the organized sector, these workers are not adequately covered by social security protection which makes them vulnerable to socioeconomic hardships. For these artisans/workers, many of whom are already very poor, the absence of social security mechanisms is a critical factor in downturns in their conditions. It undermines their potential to make a significant contribution while also enhancing productivity and output.

Considering the vast potential for economic activities, the sector has attracted some attention from the government through the introduction of relevant schemes and programs to uplift the artisan industries but the inability of the policies to adequately identify and promote the needs of craft workers and to address their core concerns regarding health, maternity relief, education of children, etc. has drawn criticism. The policies have also been criticized for continuing to fail on the ground level (Ishfaq Majeed, 2019). There is still a significant communication gap between the end user and the welfare schemes.

A sizable portion of the artisanal community is still neglected and there is no concrete provision to protect them. Despite the adoption of several welfare programs, there remains a significant gap in the coverage of these artisans in terms of labour protection and social security measures assuring their welfare. Only 214137 craftsmen out of 4 Lakh in Kashmir have registered with the Directorate of Handicrafts and Handloom Kashmir as shown in Figure 1. The remaining artisans continue to be unregistered and, as a result, do not benefit from various government welfare programs. The absence of social security mechanisms to offer risk coverage and assure the maintenance of basic living standards during crises like unemployment or health concerns increases their vulnerabilities during times of sickness, old age, unemployment, and untimely death.

Figure 1: District Wise Artisans Registered with the Directorate of Handicrafts & Handloom, Kashmir up to 31.03.2022



Source: Directorate of Handicrafts & Handloom, Kashmir

### 3. Financial Constraints

Craft producers face significant challenges due to a lack of working capital and access to credit and loan facilities. Although there are numerous organizations and schemes that offer financing, but most rural artisans are ignorant of such schemes. Moreover, financial institutions generally require security to repay loans, which is a huge barrier for artisans as they hardly have any security to offer (Bilal, 2019). Lack of accessibility to raw materials, credit and financing, proper equipment, and technology, perpetuates an exploitative environment, reducing artisans to wage labourers in the sector.

### 4. Poor Access to Information

Lack of technical knowledge on changing design and current market trends or inadequate information on new developments in the craft area is one of the main weaknesses of artisans particularly those in rural areas. The number of institutes to offer craft education in rural areas is very low and the majority of artisans are unable to enjoy the potential benefits either owing to a lack of knowledge or inadequate access. Another significant barrier to handing down cultural heritage knowledge to the next generation is the lack of traditional craft training and research at professional institutes (Bilal, 2019).

### 5. Lack of Technology Upgradation

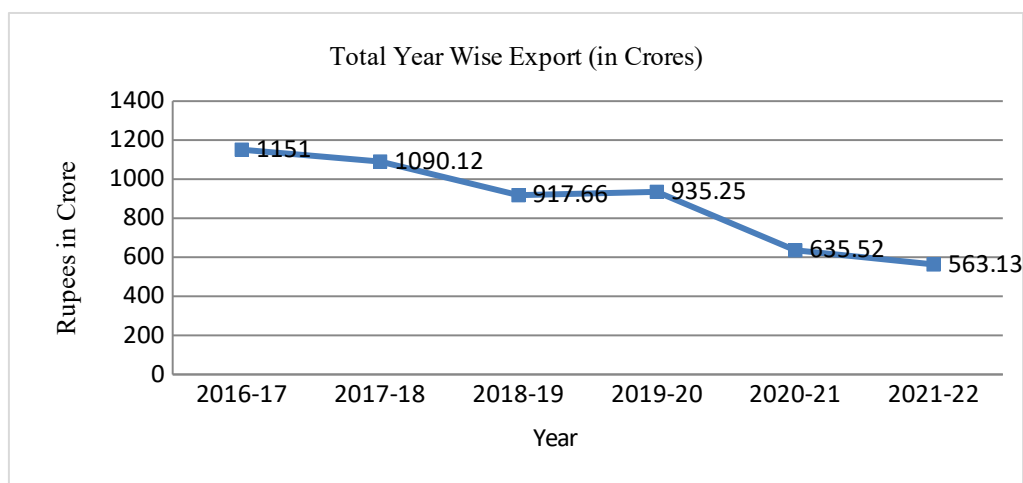
Jammu & Kashmir is one of several Indian States that has struggled to draw in both public and private sector investments. It continues to lag as it has not adopted sophisticated technologies in the handcraft manufacturing industry. Hilly terrain and inadequate infrastructure make the situation worse in terms of policy implementation (Monika Dey, 2018).

### 6. A Decline in Profits

Due to declining profits, handicrafts run the risk of becoming a part-time activity. The artisans associated with this craft have no longer an inclination to the craft since they have been unable to make a living out of it. This scenario has compelled artisan community members to migrate to various

occupations to improve their living and socioeconomic conditions. The younger generations prefer to look for more profitable career options elsewhere and are unwilling to pursue and carry on these handicraft traditions (AIACA, 2017). The unwillingness of younger generations to pursue this career has led to the extinction of certain craft traditions and many are battling for survival. This has impacted the export of handicrafts. In an alarming trend, Kashmir's handicraft exports have been declining recently. Official figures further point out that the decline in exports has been constant, recording a dip year after year as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Decline in Exports



Source: Directorate of Industries & Commerce, Kashmir

### Understanding the Concept of Social Security

Social security is a term that describes all institutional safeguards against the risks that might endanger the ability and opportunity of people and their families to generate sufficient income to maintain a decent standard of living. In essence, it is a mechanism for the State, acting as the representative of society, to protect those in need. Such protection is relevant in contingencies such as retirement, resignation, retrenchment, death, and disablement which are beyond the control of the individual members of the Society (Planning Commission, 2001).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention, Social Security (Minimum Standards) 102 of 1952 defines social security as:

“The protection which society provides for its members, through a series of public measures, against the economic and social distress that otherwise would be caused by the stoppage or substantial reduction in earning resulting from sickness, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, invalidity, old age and death, the provision of medical care; and the provision of subsidies for families with children.”

The right to social security is universally recognized as a fundamental human right that guarantees a safe, healthy and decent standard of living. The right is critical in ensuring human dignity when people are faced with circumstances that prevent them from fully exercising their basic rights (OHCHR, n.d.). As an instrument for social transformation, social security protects and empowers people, provides them with minimum standards of well-being in dire circumstances, builds resilience, and contributes to



increased economic demand and faster recovery. It is critical in promoting social cohesion and inclusion, equality and social justice, and long-term social and economic growth (ILO, 1952). The notion has gained prominence to the point that it is now a key component of public policy in the majority of countries, and its prevalence has become a yardstick of a country's progress toward the goal of a welfare state.

India, being a socialist democracy is committed to ensuring social and economic justice for all of its citizens by extending a variety of benefits of social security and social assistance. The strength and spirit of India's social security legislation stem from international commitments and constitutional obligations. Although the Constitution of India does not recognize social security as a fundamental right, it does call for the state to advance the welfare of its citizens by creating and upholding a social order where social, economic, and political justice would permeate all spheres of public life (Const. of India, art. 38). It also mandates that State, within the limitations of its economic capabilities, make appropriate provisions to safeguard the right to work, education, and public assistance in circumstances of unemployment, old age, disease, and disability (Const. of India, art. 41). The State is required to take steps to ensure fair and humane working conditions, maternity support, a living wage, and such conditions of work that guarantee a dignified standard of living (Const. of India, arts. 42, 43). Moreover, improving public health, and raising its citizens' standards of living and nutrition are counted among the primary responsibilities of the State (Const. of India, art. 47). The above-mentioned obligations imposed on the state constitute social security in India.

### **Role of Social Security Measures in the Promotion of the Handicrafts Sector**

The growth and prosperity of the handicraft sector are dependent on the socio-economic well-being of artisans and workers who work tirelessly and dedicate their time and effort to creating sustainable handicraft items. Social security measures are the facilities and services that are offered to these workers to ensure that their standard of living and quality of life won't be compromised by social or economic eventualities. It guarantees protection from unemployment by maintaining and promoting the creation of jobs, provides benefits for the maintenance of any children or dependents, and ensures their access to health care and financial stability against the consequences of specified contingencies.

Social security policies are based on the idea that a citizen should be protected against certain risks if he or she contributes to or is expected to contribute to the welfare of his country (Shivangni, 2020). Thus, social security is not a charity but a right of all workers as they contribute towards the nation's economy. It is a social, economic, and legal protection to meet the necessities as well as contingencies of life in to maintain an adequate and decent standard of living. The Supreme Court of India has recognized that

“Right to life in the Constitution of India includes protection of health and strength of the worker and the expression life, does not connote mere animal existence as it has a much wider meaning which includes the right to livelihood, better standard of life, hygienic condition in workplace and leisure” (CERC V. UOI, 1995).

The absence of a comprehensive social security framework affects more than just individual workers and their families. It has broader socioeconomic implications. From an economic standpoint, it diminishes the worker's ability to contribute meaningfully to his or her efficiency, which in turn has an impact on productivity and overall output. Also, the intersection of lower earning potential with other vulnerabilities results in poverty, which affects the aggregate demand in the economy. Socially, it causes

dissatisfaction and disaffection among the artisan and workers' community (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, 2006).

Since the artisans and workers associated with the handicrafts sector mostly come from socially and economically weaker sections of society, the lack of social protection puts them constantly at risk of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, creating a significant barrier to both economic and social development. A strong social security mechanism, therefore, constitutes an important investment in the well-being of these artisans/workers. A more capable and secure workforce could lead to higher growth, which in turn would boost aggregate demand in the economy through the higher purchasing power of this large workforce (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, 2006).

Social security thus acts as a motivational mechanism for workers and inspires them to give much more attention to their production and services than to other areas of activities like planning for future employment, tackling contingent situations, sorting out medical issues etc.,. Ensuring decent living conditions for everyone, increases productivity and employability and supports inclusive and sustainable growth.

### Conclusion

Kashmir's handicrafts sector plays an important role in its socioeconomic framework. However, sustained and equitable growth in the sector would be hard to achieve unless there is a strong social protection mechanism centered on the welfare of artisans and craft workers, which ensures them at least a basic degree of social security in difficult times. Although there is a larger framework of government schemes and programs related to social protection, financial assistance, market linkage formation, skill, and design development, and so on, the last mile user is unaware of them. As a result, access to benefits is restricted, if not non-existent in some circumstances. A significant number of artisans have not reaped the full benefits of their labour and quality of life. To ensure that this creative and cultural industry continues to remain buoyant and vibrant, there is an urgent need to increase the outlay in social security schemes and make a progressive extension of the scope and level of social security coverage by making a stronger case for the deeper penetration and targeting of artisan beneficiaries for social security entitlements. Strategic collaborations between the government, civil society, and other key stakeholders can go a long way towards achieving this goal.

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