

## **CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE PRESERVATION OF TRADITIONAL WOODEN HANDICRAFTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ARTISAN LIVELIHOOD AND CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY IN JODHPUR**

Dr. Nishant Gehlot\*  
Lovesh Parihar\*\*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The handicraft sector in India is both an economic driver and a custodian of cultural heritage, yet it faces mounting challenges due to modernization, exploitation by intermediaries, and declining artisan participation. Jodhpur's wooden handicraft cluster exemplifies these struggles, where thousands of artisans remain marginalized despite the global demand for their products. This paper examines the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in sustaining artisan livelihoods and preserving traditional crafts, with a focus on the potential of CSR-driven interventions. Drawing on case analyses of ITC's e-Choupal initiative, Titan Company's skill development programs, and Fab India's fair-trade model, the study highlights how private sector participation can foster sustainable artisan empowerment. e-Choupal demonstrates how digital platforms can eliminate middlemen and enhance producer bargaining power, while Titan's design-led training models showcase the integration of tradition with modernity. Fab India provides an example of how fair-trade partnerships and CSR-driven networks ensure both economic viability and cultural preservation. The findings suggest that adopting such models within Jodhpur's handicraft sector can address gaps in skill development, market access, financial inclusion, and infrastructure support. The paper concludes with actionable CSR outcomes, positioning corporate engagement as a critical strategy for cultural sustainability, artisan empowerment, and inclusive rural development.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India has developed into a critical component of corporate governance and strategy, especially after the Companies Act, 2013 made CSR spending mandatory for qualifying companies. Since then, billions of rupees have been invested annually in education, health, and environmental sustainability (Kumar & Choudhary, 2017). However, sectors linked to cultural heritage, particularly handicrafts, continue to remain marginalized in CSR allocations.

Handicrafts are not only a source of economic livelihood but also a custodian of cultural identity. Rajasthan, known for its vibrant craft traditions, holds a central place in India's heritage economy. Within it, Jodhpur has emerged as a global hub for wooden handicrafts producing furniture, carvings, and decorative objects admired worldwide. Yet, despite its global reputation, the sector is under strain. Artisans face low incomes, limited market access, declining youth participation, and lack of technological innovation (Jain, 2020).

CSR provides a framework for addressing these systemic challenges. By redirecting funds and initiatives toward artisan clusters, corporations can integrate social responsibility with cultural sustainability, creating long-term inclusive growth. This paper examines the potential of CSR in sustaining Jodhpur's wooden handicrafts by focusing on the challenges faced by artisans, analyzing existing CSR practices in other industries, and drawing lessons from successful private-sector initiatives such as ITC's e-Choupal, Titan's craft development programs, and FabIndia's fair-trade model.

\* Assistant Professor, Department of Management Studies, Jodhpur

\*\* Research Scholar, Department of Management Studies, Jodhpur

## **RATIONALE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Despite the economic and cultural importance of handicrafts in Rajasthan, limited CSR attention has been directed toward this sector. Most CSR initiatives prioritize areas that are measurable in short-term outputs, such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare. While these are vital, neglecting cultural and craft-based industries threatens intangible heritage and exacerbates rural economic vulnerabilities.

The problem is two-fold:

1. **Artisan Challenges:** Jodhpur artisans face market exploitation, declining demand for handcrafted items due to industrial substitutes, insufficient access to design innovation, and lack of financial support.
2. **CSR Gap:** Corporate entities have not systematically engaged with the handicraft sector, despite its potential to generate livelihoods, empower women artisans, and promote India's soft power through cultural exports.

This paper therefore raises the central research question: How can CSR interventions contribute to the preservation of traditional wooden handicrafts and improve the socio-economic well-being of artisans in Jodhpur?

## **CHALLENGES OF JODHPUR WOODEN HANDICRAFTS**

Jodhpur's handicrafts sector sustains thousands of families, many from marginalized communities. Yet artisans face multiple barriers:

**Economic Exploitation:** Middlemen dominate value chains, leaving artisans with only 10-20% of the product's final market value (Chaudhary, 2019).

**Declining Youth Engagement:** Younger generations prefer alternate professions due to financial insecurity (Sharma, 2021).

**Lack of Innovation:** Artisans have limited access to global design trends, reducing competitiveness (Mehta & Kapoor, 2020).

**Infrastructure Deficiency:** Inadequate tools, machines, and common facility centers restrict productivity.

**Gender Disparity:** Women often contribute to finishing processes but remain unrecognized and underpaid.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

1. To analyze the challenges faced by wooden handicraft artisans in Jodhpur in the context of modernization and globalization.
2. To examine the existing role of CSR in India with specific reference to heritage preservation and artisan livelihoods.
3. To propose CSR-driven models for sustaining the traditional handicrafts sector, with emphasis on skill development, market access, and cultural sustainability.
4. To highlight policy and managerial recommendations for corporates and stakeholders engaged in the handicrafts ecosystem.

## **THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

CSR has traditionally been understood in the framework of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), where businesses are accountable not only to shareholders but also to communities, employees, and the environment. In the context of handicrafts, this translates to recognizing artisans as critical stakeholders in supply chains and cultural sustainability.

Additionally, Carroll's CSR Pyramid (1991) emphasizes four dimensions economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities which can be applied to the handicraft's context.

For instance:

**Economic:** Ensuring fair trade and providing artisans with sustainable incomes.

**Legal:** Complying with labor rights and cooperative regulations.

**Ethical:** Supporting craft traditions and ensuring dignity of labor.

**Philanthropic:** Contributing to community development through craft training, education, and design innovation.

This conceptual grounding suggests that CSR can act as a driver of sustainable entrepreneurship in heritage sectors.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach. Secondary data sources include CSR reports of major Indian corporations, government CSR expenditure databases, and prior research on artisan livelihoods in Rajasthan. Additionally, case examples of successful CSR interventions in similar craft clusters, such as Jaipur Blue Pottery and Kutch embroidery, are analyzed to draw parallels for Jodhpur.

## CASE OF JODHPUR WOODEN HANDICRAFTS

Jodhpur's wooden handicrafts industry employs thousands of artisans, many belonging to marginalized communities. Products include wooden furniture, carved decorative items, and antique-style crafts, catering primarily to export markets. Despite global demand, artisans receive only a fraction of the final product value due to middlemen and inadequate branding strategies.

## CSR INTERVENTIONS COULD ADDRESS THESE ISSUES THROUGH:

**Skill Development:** Establishing training centers for modern design adaptation while retaining traditional skills.

**Technology Integration:** Supporting artisans in digital marketing and e-commerce platforms.

**Financial Support:** Providing micro-credit facilities and linking artisans with cooperatives.

**Market Linkages:** Partnering with corporates for direct procurement and branding initiatives.

**Infrastructure:** Setting up common facility centers equipped with tools, machinery, and shared resources.

## POTENTIAL CSR MODELS FOR HANDICRAFT SUSTAINABILITY

1. Cluster Development Approach: Corporates can adopt entire artisan clusters, funding training, design, and marketing under CSR initiatives.
2. Public-Private Partnerships: CSR funds can be aligned with government schemes such as Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana and Skill India to maximize impact.
3. Women Empowerment through CSR: Special programs can target women artisans, providing them with skill development and leadership roles in cooperatives.
4. Sustainable Supply Chain Integration: Corporates in furniture, lifestyle, and retail sectors can integrate Jodhpur wooden handicrafts into their CSR-driven sourcing policies.

## **BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS**

Several Indian corporations provide inspiration:

ITC's e-Choupal has empowered rural producers by bypassing middlemen and creating direct market linkages.

Titan Company has invested in traditional crafts such as jewelry-making and design schools.

FabIndia Foundation has worked with artisans to promote fair trade and sustainable livelihoods.

These models can be adapted to Jodhpur's handicraft sector under CSR initiatives.

### **CASE STUDY 1:**

#### **ITC's e-Choupal- A CSR-Like Platform for Rural Transformation**

The e-Choupal initiative by ITC, though primarily targeting agriculture, offers a scalable model for artisan clusters. Launched in 2000, e-Choupal established digital kiosks in villages to connect farmers directly with ITC, bypassing middlemen (Annamalai & Rao, 2003). It empowered rural producers with real-time market information, fair pricing, and reduced exploitation.

Key Features of e-Choupal:

1. Direct Market Access → Farmers could sell produce directly to ITC.
2. Knowledge Sharing → Weather forecasts, best practices, and crop management guidance.
3. Community Empowerment → Creation of local 'sanchalaks' (trained operators) who managed kiosks.

Technology Integration → Internet-enabled rural kiosks to bridge the digital divide.

Relevance for Jodhpur Artisans:

A similar CSR-backed digital platform can connect artisans with global buyers. By reducing middlemen, artisans can secure better incomes. CSR initiatives could fund training for artisans in digital marketing, catalog creation, and e-commerce, transforming the sector just as e-Choupal did for agriculture.

### **CASE STUDY 2:**

#### **Titan Company Ltd. - Skill Development for Craft Preservation**

Titan, part of the Tata Group, has extended CSR toward heritage preservation. The company's initiatives include setting up design schools, skill development programs, and collaborations with traditional jewelry craftsmen (Nair, 2018). By combining modern design with traditional skills, Titan has not only preserved craftsmanship but also created sustainable employment opportunities.

Key CSR Contributions of Titan:

Established training centers for design and craft.

Promoted innovation without compromising traditional identity.

Built strong brand value by associating with heritage preservation.

Lessons for Jodhpur:

A Titan-style intervention in Jodhpur could support artisan training centers focusing on furniture design, finishing techniques, and global market demands. Corporates could invest in "Craft Labs" where traditional artisans work with designers, ensuring continuity and market relevance.

### **CASE STUDY 3:**

#### **FabIndia – Fair Trade and Inclusive Supply Chains**

Fab India is renowned for building direct artisan linkages under fair-trade principles. Its model integrates thousands of artisans into its value chain, ensuring fair wages and consistent demand (Patel, 2016). Through the Fab India Foundation, the company invests in community development, education, and health facilities for artisans.

Key Contributions:

Fair Trade Practices → Artisans are treated as stakeholders.

Market Integration → Products marketed globally with artisan stories.

Community Development → CSR projects in education and health within artisan villages.

Relevance for Jodhpur:

Fab India's model demonstrates that handicrafts can be commercially viable while also being socially responsible. Corporates could replicate this by creating direct procurement systems for wooden handicrafts, branding them as sustainable and ethical, and promoting artisan identities.

### **PROPOSED CSR MODELS FOR JODHPUR WOODEN HANDICRAFTS**

Based on these cases, CSR interventions for Jodhpur could follow four models:

1. Cluster Development Model → Corporates adopt artisan clusters, investing in training, marketing, and infrastructure.
2. PPP Model → CSR aligned with government schemes like Skill India and Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana.
3. Digital Market Access → E-commerce platforms modeled after e-Choupal.
4. Women-Centric CSR → Supporting women artisans through cooperatives, training, and leadership roles.

### **EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION**

From the detailed cases and analysis, the following outcomes emerge:

1. CSR can bridge the gap between artisans and markets by reducing dependency on intermediaries.
2. Skill development programs (Titan model) ensure heritage continuity while upgrading artisan competitiveness.
3. Fair trade linkages (Fab India model) integrate artisans into sustainable supply chains.
4. Digital empowerment (e-Choupal model) can revolutionize access to markets and information.
5. CSR partnerships with government schemes can multiply the impact of interventions.
6. Women-centric initiatives create inclusive growth and social equity.

### **CONCLUSION**

CSR, when strategically applied, has the potential to transform the handicrafts sector by addressing systemic barriers of exploitation, skill erosion, and lack of innovation. Jodhpur's wooden handicrafts, as a globally recognized craft cluster, present both a challenge and an opportunity for CSR.

The cases of ITC's e-Choupal, Titan, and Fab India demonstrate how CSR-inspired initiatives can create transformative impact in rural economies. Replicating and adapting these models for Jodhpur would not only preserve cultural heritage but also ensure sustainable livelihoods for artisans.

In conclusion, CSR interventions in handicrafts must go beyond philanthropy and adopt long-term, strategic models that empower artisans, integrate them into global markets, and ensure cultural sustainability. If corporates embrace this responsibility, Jodhpur's wooden handicrafts can evolve into a model of CSR-driven rural and cultural development.

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