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Kashmir's Craft Heritage: A Profile and Assessment of Artisans in Kulgam District

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ABSTRACT:

Jammu and Kashmir has a distinguished heritage of art and craft. The beauty of its handicrafts is known worldwide, owing good name and fame in national and international markets. The art is playing an important role in the cultural heritage of Kashmir. The purpose of this paper is to study the general profile of artisans and craftsmen in district Kulgam. The author would also like to highlight the problems being faced by the artisans and craftsmen in district Kulgam.

Key words: Heritage, art, craft, cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION:

Kashmir presents the unique picture of a land where unity transcends the innumerable verities and diversities of religion, language, race and culture. Kashmir a beautiful place is located in northern India between great Himalayas and Pir Panjal Mountain. Kashmir is not only famous for its scenic beauties but also for its rich cultural heritage and contribution to philosophy, religion, literature, art and craft (**Kaw, 2008**). Jammu and Kashmir located in northern India is known worldwide for its art and craft. Kashmiri Artists have brought laurels to the valley based on their skills in designing the artistic items revealing their true legacy towards the craft. The Kashmiri art has dominated the world for its creativity and Excellency. The excellence of Kashmiri artists over the craft and the mastering in creating mesmerizing products has helped the valley to occupy a significant place in the world crafts. The genesis of art and craft started in Kashmir in ancient times and has continued its influence over the world art till date (**Jammu and Kashmir culture, 2015**). Kashmir handicraft products are acknowledged both at national and international level due to their beauty, charm, fine and accurate designs. The significance of this art cannot be denied. The handicrafts were introduced during the rule of King Zain ul Abidin (1420-1470), thus has a rich heritage of handicraft that has evolved over the centuries. Every district in Jammu and Kashmir has its own speciality ranging from pottery making, Willow wicking, Wood carving, carpet weaving, stone carving, embroidery, chain stitching, crewel work to paper machine and other items. The handicraft sector is considered as the backbone of rural economy, providing employment to large populations. Large inhabitants of district Kulgam directly or indirectly depend upon the handicraft industry. The artisans are facing many problems which include poor prices, rising cost of inputs, exploitation by vendors and disappearing market. The artisans struggle hard for their existence.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Jammu and Kashmir has a plentiful dazzling art and craft. The significance of this art cannot be denied. This art has been a source of livelihood for the people of Kashmir. The Kashmir artisans and craftsmen were known for their craftsmanship from the time immemorial. The handicraft sector is the second most preferred sector after agriculture in Jammu and Kashmir. (**Effat Yasmin and F. A. Bhat 2013**) revealed in their study that handicrafts sector have an important role to play in the development of country in general and J&K in particular. In the absence of large scale industries in the State, handicrafts have remained a key economic activity from times immemorial. The famous art works of Kashmir are: Paper Machie; Chain Stitch and Crewel Work, Carpet Weaving, Wood Carving, Willow Wicking etc. Kashmir came into economic limelight when the world famous cashmere wool and other hand-made articles were exported to other regions and nations. Kashmiris are adept at making fine quality wool shawls, carpets, and wood carving and Paper Machie articles (**N. Tsirliganis, 2016**). The Kashmiri craftsmen are still very skilful as excellent in paper moulding, miniature paintings, wood carving, weaving and embroidery of Kashmiri Shawls, Chaddar (Veil) Making, Gabba-Sazi, NamdaSazi, Carpet Weaving, Papier-Mâché, Jewellery Making and Silver Inscription, Tila Work, etc. (**Kaumudi, 2005**). Kashmir has a continuous tradition of arts and crafts which included Papier-mâché, Shawl and Silk weaving, embroidery, needle work, rug making wool making and stone work (**Sufi, 2007**). The people of the valley have developed their technical and artistic traditions over centuries. It involves beauty, creativity and a profound sense to make something new, something eye catching (**Bhat, 2008**). Artisans are the important player in rural economy, as they produce goods by using local raw material, and mostly dispose them off in the local markets. It is also said that handicraft artisans with their excellent artistic skills and workman have played and are playing crucial role in our economy (**Ishtyaq, 2011**).

DISTRICT PROFILE KULGAM:

Kulgam is located at 33 ° 39N 75) 01/33.65N 75.02Y33.65;75.02. It has an elevation of 1739 meters. This town is a picturesque place nestling on the bank of river Veshaw across the wide spread of which is the foothills of great Pir Panchal Mountains. The topography of kulgam is very charming and worth seeing. Kulgam is an important place in south Kashmir. Kulgam connects and its boundaries touch all the three districts Shopain, Anantnag and Pulwama of south Kashmir. Kulgam is famous because of so many things especially because of famous religious saint (Sayed Simnani Sahab) who gave it the name *Kulgam*. Syed Simnani came from Simnan in Iran. Travelling in Kashmir valley he came to kulgam and liked the spot on a cliff overlooking river Veshaw. Sheik Nur-ud —din (R A) also known as Nund Rishi , was a famous Kashmir saint who belonged to rishi order, patron saint of Kashmir highly revered by both Muslims and Hindus was also born in kulgam in 779A.H =1377 A.O .The family of Nur-ud-din is buried in kaimoh. Kulgam is the birthplace of ancestors of Allama Iqbal (Supur village). Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's ancestors also are from Nundimarg a village in district kulgam. According to census 2011,the district kulgam has a population of 422,786,area of 1,067 km sq and a density of 400/km sq.The local language here is Urdu, People also speak Dogri, Punjabi. The district is divided into 6 Blocks,39 Panchayat, and 214 Villages (**Kulgam history,2018**).

OBJECTIVES:

- ❖ To study the general profile of artisans of Kulgam district.
- ❖ To study the work and activities of artisans.
- ❖ To study the challenges faced and issues experienced by rural artisans by artisans.

Methodology:

The target population for the study was artisans and craftsmen in the District Kulgam.The list of artisans was obtained from directorate of handicrafts, district Kulgam. Fifty artisans were identified and forty of them were selected for our present study .The study is based on primary data in which the sample has been taken randomly from different villages of the district. For the collection of primary data, interview and observation methods were used. The gathered information was scrutinized and arranged properly.

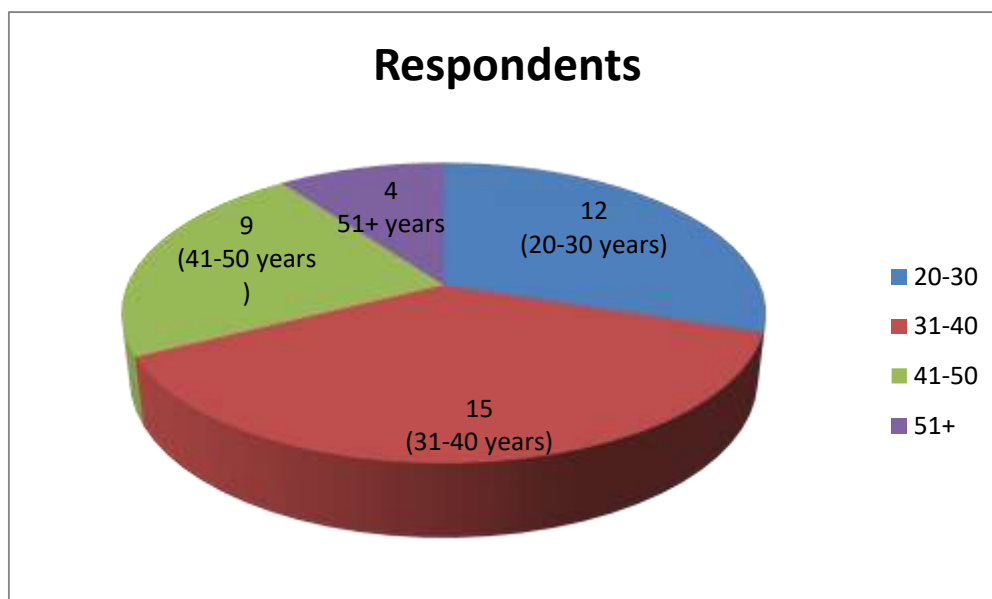
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Personal and Social Factors: The findings indicate that most of the respondents belonged to the middle age group and had only primary-level education. The majority are male. A crucial personal factor is their "low annual income," which directly contributes to their impoverished state. This financial vulnerability makes them highly susceptible to economic shifts and reduces their capacity for investment in their craft or personal development. The personal and social factors like age, religion, education, and income etc. of the respondents are examined and given below:

AGE: The result says that majority of the respondents belonged to middle age group.

Age	No. of respondents	Percentage
20-30	12	30%
31-40	15	37.5%
41-50	9	22.5%
51+	4	10%

(Table 1.)

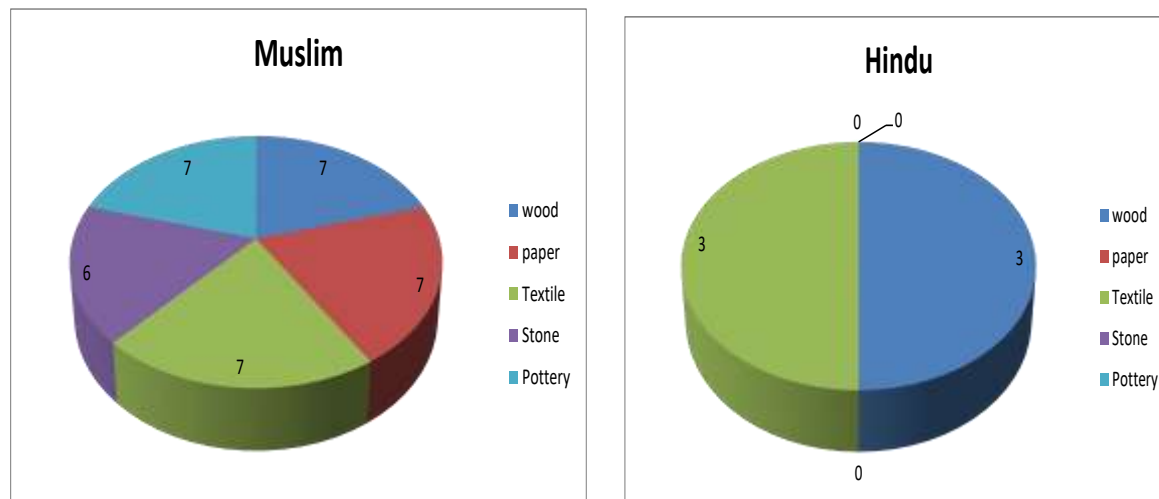


The result (Table 1) says that majority of the respondents belonged to middle age group.

RELIGION: Religion plays a vital role in the evaluation of culture. Many of the Muslim and Hindu families have been making the livelihoods for last couple of decades in making of the craft items. In Kulgam district of Jammu and Kashmir, many artisans view their craft not merely as a means of livelihood but as a sacred legacy inherited through generations. For numerous Muslim and Hindu families in the region, traditional craftsmanship is intricately tied to their religious beliefs and cultural practices. An enquiry made into the religion of the respondents is as given below:

Religion	Wood	Paper	Textile	Stone	Pottery
Muslim	7	7	7	6	7
Hindu	3	0	3	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0

(Table 2.)



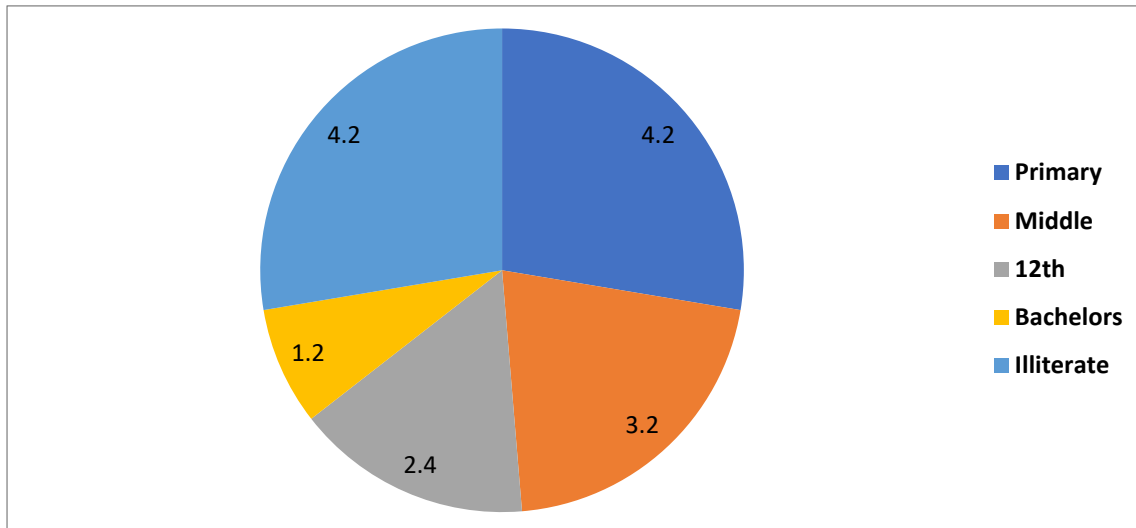
Majority of the respondents in almost all the crafts belong to Muslim religion. A small proportion of craftsmen belong to Hindu religion.

From the Table (2), it is observed that over 85 percent of the total 40 respondents (34 respondents) belong to Muslim religion. The remaining 15 percent respondents (6 respondents) belong to Hindu religion.

EDUCATION: Education and literacy plays an important role in the every field of life. Education helps a person to venture in innovative activities leading to social and economic growth of the individual as well as for the country. Illiteracy and low educational qualifications of artisans make it difficult to access government schemes. Lack of education is certainly an obstacle in the process of development.

Education	Frequency	Percent
Primary	12	30
Middle	8	20
12 th	6	15
Bachelors	2	5
Illiterate	12	30
Total	40	100

Table (3): Educational qualification of the artisans



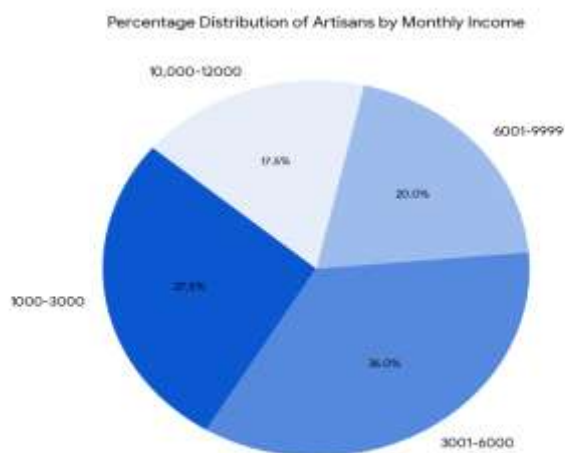
The table (3) above shows that 30 percent handicraft producers got primary education, 20 percent got middle education, 15 percent secondary education, 5 percent got bachelors degree and 30 percent craftsmen are illiterate.

INCOME: The wages of artisans are very low and not sufficient to meet their daily expenses. For many artisans, the compensation for their skilled work is tragically low, creating a constant struggle for survival. Their meager wages are often insufficient to cover even the most basic daily expenses, such as food for their families, a safe place to live, or essential healthcare. This financial instability forces them into a cycle of poverty where saving is impossible and debt becomes a frequent reality. Consequently, they are unable to invest in better tools, new materials, or training that could enhance their craft and potentially increase their income. Ultimately, this economic hardship not only jeopardizes their own well-being but also threatens the very existence of their traditional art form, as many are forced to abandon their professions in search of more sustainable livelihoods.

The annual income of the respondents ranged between Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 12,000. Over one – third of the respondents have annual income between Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 12,000.

Monthly Income	Wood	Paper	Textile	Stone	Pottery	Total	Percentage
1000-3000	3	2	2	2	3	11	27.5
3001-6000	4	2	3	2	2	14	35
6001-9999	2	2	3	1	2	8	20
10,000-12000	1	1	2	1	0	7	17.5
Total	10	7	10	6	7	40	100

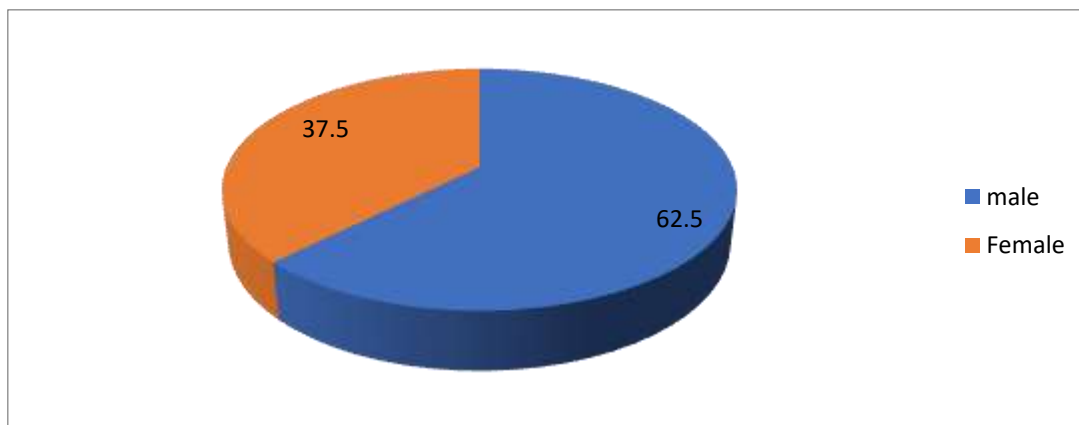
(Table 4)



GENDER ANALYSIS OF HANDICRAFT IN DISTRICT: the handicraft sector in the Kulgam district, is predominantly male-dominated, a trend deeply rooted in traditional gender roles. The reason for this imbalance is that women are primarily responsible for domestic duties, which significantly limits their ability to participate in the craft. Their daily lives are largely consumed by taking care of children, looking after elderly family members, and managing household chores. These responsibilities leave little to no time for them to learn, practice, and earn a living from a craft that requires focused dedication and skill. As a result, these societal expectations and domestic obligations act as a major barrier, effectively excluding women from the handicraft profession and solidifying its status as a male-dominated field. The reason behind male dominated craft is taking care of children ,old age family members involvement in household chores in the domain of females.

Sex	Wood	Paper	Textile/Fabric	Stone	Ceramics/pottery	Total
Male	5 (wood carving)	6	2	6	6	25
Female	5 (Basket weaving)	2	6	0	2	15

Table 5: Male / Female involvement in the craft.



An analysis of the data reveals distinct gender patterns across various craft sectors in the Kulgam district. Within the wood-based handicrafts, wood carving is predominantly practiced by men, whereas basket weaving shows higher participation among women. Paper-based craft activities are largely male-dominated, while textile and fabric-related crafts are primarily undertaken by women. Similarly, stone-based crafts, as well as ceramics and pottery, exhibit a strong male dominance. These findings highlight a clear gender-based division of labor within the traditional craft sectors of the District Kulgam.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACED BY ARTISANS OF DISTRICT KULGAM:

The artisans face many problems like poor prices, rising cost of inputs ,poor marketing strategies.

1. **Rising cost of inputs:** Artisans often face a tough time sourcing the raw materials they need. These materials are rarely available locally, forcing them to travel long distances from their workplaces just to procure the essentials. This not only takes up valuable time but also adds to their expenses. To make

matters worse, the prices of these raw materials are rising steadily, making it even harder for them to sustain their craft. In such conditions, managing their livelihood and defending their fragile economic situation becomes a daily struggle.

2. Poor prices: Handmade products are slowly being pushed aside as machine-made items take over the market. Artisans are finding it increasingly difficult to compete—both in terms of production volume and pricing. No matter how skilled they are, traditional crafts simply can't match the speed and low cost of mass-produced goods. Adding to the challenge is the flood of cheap Chinese items, which are widely available and often preferred by buyers. This growing pressure is putting the livelihoods of local craftsmen at serious risk, threatening the survival of age-old skills and cultural heritage

3. Poor marketing and exploitation by vendors: Marketing plays a vital role in helping any business grow—but for many artisans, it remains a missing link. Many of them shared that their work doesn't get the publicity it deserves, making it difficult to attract new buyers. Without proper exposure, even the most beautiful handcrafted items go unnoticed. This lack of visibility makes artisans vulnerable to exploitation. Middlemen often step in and take a large share of the profits, leaving the actual creators with very little. Poor marketing strategies and this unfair profit distribution create major roadblocks in promoting traditional handicrafts. On top of that, most artisans don't have access to modern tools, facilities, or infrastructure that could help improve their work or reach wider markets. As a result, they are left struggling in an unfair system despite their talent and dedication

4. Problems in accessing credit: The financial condition of artisans and craftsmen in the district remains poor, forcing many of them to depend on local moneylenders to meet their financial needs. Several respondents, particularly those involved in stone carving and pottery, expressed their frustration, saying, *"Banks don't show interest in giving us loans because they think we can't guarantee repayment. Since there's no surety that we'll be able to pay the money back, they avoid dealing with us."*

Even when they do manage to access loans, the interest rates are often too high to bear, adding to their financial burden rather than easing it.

5. Lack of Awareness about Government Aid and Credit Facilities: One of the critical challenges faced by artisans and craftsmen is their limited awareness of the various government-sponsored aid, subsidy, and credit schemes devised for their welfare and upliftment. Although the government, through organizations, and other state and central schemes provides financial incentives, soft loans, skill development programmes, insurance cover, and marketing assistance — many artisans remain unaware of these schemes due to poor information dissemination at the grassroots level.

Inadequate information-sharing mechanisms, weak extension services, poor outreach by government agencies, and absence of effective awareness campaigns prevent artisans from utilizing these welfare programmes fully, thus restraining their socio-economic growth and contributing to their continued vulnerability and marginalization.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION:

Handicraft sector generates employment and a large population directly or indirectly depend upon handicrafts for their livelihood. The handicraft industry is highly profitable. The handicraft products of Jammu and Kashmir are acknowledged both at national and international level for their delicate designs and skilful craftsmanship. The artisans had been backbone of rural economy and a valuable asset of society. The artisans earn a certain status in the society. The artisans face many problems like poor prices, rising cost of inputs, poor marketing strategies. The handicraft products are being replaced by machine made products. The artisans depend on private people, who usually take advantage of the situation and exploit the artisans. Due to the negligence by the government, the economic status of artisans is badly affected. From the past two decades most of the artisans are switching to other professions, due to low income. The machine made products has affected the Kashmiri art and handicraft industry is facing enormous problems. Government needs to take immediate action for the upliftment of artisans and to motivate them for continuous work. In order to protect these valuable assets proper steps should be taken to preserve it. The Govt should provide necessary assistance to the artisans. In order to encourage the artisans and craftsmen for continuous work, the government must provide them with necessary resources, loan facilities and insurance schemes. To help them compete in the fast-changing market, regular exposure visits and capacity-building workshops should be organised to upgrade their marketing knowledge and skills.

The voices of rural artisans must be taken seriously while planning future strategies, so that their traditional craft continues and younger generations stay connected to their ancestral occupation. The supply of quality raw material should be timely, adequate, and affordable, because irregular availability and high costs directly affect their production and income. By incorporating these practical suggestions into policy planning, not only will the artisans' interest in their hereditary craft be sustained, but the rich cultural legacy of our handmade traditions will also be preserved for the future.

To uplift rural artisans, authorities should provide managerial and marketing training, ensure access to subsidies and institutional credit, and organise exposure programmes to enhance their skills and market competitiveness.

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