

# A study of marketing strategies used by Indian artisans during the Covid-19 crisis

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## Abstract

70% of the population lives in villages in India. Time and again, we have underestimated this part of our population while thinking about our country's economic growth. However, the true spirit and skills of Indian crafts live in rural areas that are self-sufficient and self-reliant. Indian crafts have evolved from the Vedic Era to Indus Valley civilization to Mauryan Era to the Mughal Era, and currently the Modern Indian Era. However, with industrialization and the informal nature of the sector, Indian crafts had started losing relevance. Though 90% population is uneducated, Indian crafts are highly skill-based. Today with the advent of technology, awareness among the new generation of artisans, emerging sectors of the economy, Indian crafts are being revived with the help of craft activists and platforms created for uplifting the community. Slowly as this sector started reviving itself and generated awareness and business, a novel coronavirus pandemic has affected their livelihood. Most artisans have an informal setup. The uncertainty of the situation, ruptured supply chain, canceled orders, and customers' non-engagement in buying the products; have blurred their future. With no raw materials, no business, no demand, and a huge inventory of canceled orders, various platforms are being created to market their products and generate funds. A study of the marketing strategy is important to know the way forward.

## Keywords

Indian artisans, COVID19, Marketing strategy, Livelihood, Indian crafts, Crisis, Survival

## Imprint

Anandita Ballal. A study of marketing strategies used by Indian artisans during the Covid-19 crisis. *Cardiometry*; Issue 23; August 2022; p. 635-640; DOI: 10.18137/cardiometry.2022.23.635640; Available from: <http://www.cardiometry.net/issues/no23-august-2022/study-marketing-strategies>

## 1 Introduction

Handicrafts have been an important part of Indian history. Indian handicrafts represent the artisans' skills and reflect the heritage, culture, and richness of various arts. The deep roots of handicrafts' origin have helped evolve over centuries from the Indus Valley civilization times to current Modern India [1]. We can still witness the ancient arts and handicrafts which originated during 3000 BC in various museums and scriptures. Each era includes Indus Valley Civilization, Vedic Age, Mauryan Age, Gupta Age, Mughal Era, British Age; developed several handicrafts and added skills from various parts of the globe [2]. Some handicrafts originated due to humanity's needs. In contrast, some handicrafts developed due to trade between different countries, resulting in an exchange of skills and techniques. The handicrafts' designs and products have seen a significant transformation owing to the preferences and tastes from generation to generation [3]. The artisan community has a very strong connection with the agriculture sector as maximum artisans belong to rural India, and farming is part of their employment and livelihood. Today, we have a maximum hand skilled and self-sufficient population living in a rural part of our country [4]. If we look at India's geography and history, we will realize every part of our country has a rich culture and a craft well-known to that place. As the crafts sector was recognized as an unorganized sector of our economy, its development and importance traveled less experienced though it generates maximum employment. The export market did very well in the craft's domain till it was hit by inflation during the late 2000s [5]. With rising awareness among the Indian population and an increase in International tourism, artisans are getting various platforms to showcase their skills and products. Industrialization and the advancement of machinery and technology are the biggest challenges for the hand skills sector. Apart from fast manufacturing, crafts produced with technology, synthetic, and chemical-based raw materials are lower in price range, thus flooding the market with counterfeit products. The recent developments in the craft sector were visible through raising awareness in various markets, availability of contemporary designs inspired by traditional designs, competitive pricing, use in fashion and interior sectors, artisan, connect, increase in supply chain methods, direct communication of artisan and consumer, widespread

platforms giving recognition to artisans and their products, movements by craft enthusiasts and social activists, easy availability of raw materials and increase in exports [6].

As the crafts sector was reviving itself and feeling a sense of hope, their livelihood and dreams were knocked off by a biological pitfall- the Corona Virus (COVID19) pandemic. The coronavirus spread, and nationwide lockdown started in Mid-March 2020 and got extended till an unexpected time. Many handicrafts are manufactured during the peak summer months as natural dyes and raw materials are made and used. Also, some crafts require natural heat and sunlight for their production process. Many artisans take their annual orders during this time and manufacture on a large scale. The products are made for B2B or B2C types of markets [7]. A large part is manufactured for the exports or exhibitions and sales happening during the festive and occasional seasons. Due to the sudden lockdown announcement and no clarity of the future, there was a sense of panic among the artisan communities. The initial shock was hard to digest as their livelihood was at stake. The health crisis was not worrying them as much they need to survive due to rising prices of essentials and no financial aid as promised by the government, and certain NGOs reached them [8]. The artisans' main struggle was large inventory, cancellation of orders, unsettled payments, orders on hold, raw materials or finished products stuck in the supply chain, canceled events, no sales, and unpaid artisans' salaries, working with certain brands or organizations. Their livelihood and daily wages depend on the quantity of work produced [9]. The artisans are the migrant workers who were traveling back to their villages once they stopped getting work. Along with the health crisis came the environmental crisis in June 2020. An earthquake and artisans of Odisha shook the artisans of Kutch (Gujarat). West Bengal and Assam found it very tough to sail through the floods and cyclones. The artisan communities are at the bottom of the economic pyramid [10]. Many craft clusters were already under pressure from times of demonetization and the new GST policy. They feel the government should implement a permanent solution for their livelihoods and save their clusters. The main focus should be saving the skilled craftsmen as they tend to shift to other income sources, which give them fixed monthly salary, economic status and social acceptance, thus leading to the extinction of the craft [11].

Many craft communities are holding themselves strong by engaging in thinking or designing new products, alternative raw materials, experimenting with colors, introducing products that would be categorized as essential, training new members, or rediscovering some long-lost techniques once used by their forefathers [12]. For some artisans, this is a time to sit back and think about their business's growth. With physical platforms like exhibitions and festive markets unavailable for promoting their products, they are learning and grasping the technological advancements to reach their consumers [13]. The young generation of artisans is finding ways to help their families sail through the tough times by pushing sales and learning the skills from their father and grandfather; otherwise, they are busy with their education [14].

Unfortunately, many handicrafts are the discretionary product. With the changing times and to keep up with the market, the artisans are working on creating need-based products like essential kits, masks, and eco-friendly products [15].

The need for them to create new marketing strategies to reach out to their consumers to overcome the crisis's bolt. A change of marketing and sales plan will help the artisans to re-enter the market as we slowly enter the phases of un-lockdown. Rather than depending on the market to open full-fledged and export business to restart, artisans should concentrate on the domestic market and try to liquidate their inventory, thus creating a turnover of funds. For this, they need to work on revamping their strategies to reach the B2B and B2C market through various online modes and connecting themselves with various craft platforms.

## 1.1 Objective of the paper

This paper studies the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the lives and business of Indian Artisans. Since COVID-19 is an anomalous event, the findings of this study are novel. They could be used by the entire artisan community, craft organizations, designers, and NGOs to develop a marketing framework. It could also help the government agencies to form policies relating to the marketing and selling of handicrafts in India.

## 2 Research methodologies

This paper gives information based on facts collected directly from the affected community of artisans. The various handicraft cluster artisans were contacted to collect the data. The study is purely based on and

carried out during crisis' times, which was unprecedented. An online questionnaire survey was carried out on artisans via a telephonic interview (as there is the barrier of technology used by the artisan) as field visit is not possible during these times. The literature was reviewed by reading various news articles, webinars, and analyses done by crafts experts.

### 3 Results

The online survey was conducted on a sample size of 20 Indian Artisans practicing various handicrafts. The artisans belong to different craft clusters spread across the country. The respondents of the conducted survey belong to the ancestral family of master artisans. Maximum of them are the 5th and above generation practicing the age-old techniques and processes of handicrafts passed on from their forefathers.

The important observation after the survey was, half of the sample size was practicing their ancestral craft for 20 years. 63% stated that their next generation is into practicing or plans to practice the crafts further.

When the survey focused on the impact of the crisis and their marketing strategies, the results were poor. Lack of education, awareness, and being located in remote villages has further impacted these factors.

When the COVID-19 crisis loomed over India, Nationwide lockdown from Mid-march, 65% of Artisans stalled their production process. 55% suffered from order cancellations leading to huge inventory and unpaid payments.

During the peak of the crisis period, 50% of artisans utilized their raw materials and time to create new designs. In contrast, the rest, 50%, had to stop all production due to lack of raw materials and no new orders.

When we talk about slowly reviving from the crisis and looking at the future way forward, 90% of the Artisans did not think about New Marketing Strategies. In contrast, the rest 10%, took advice and guidance and tried to find ways to tap the potential customers.

In terms of usage of online modes of communication and marketing, the easiest to use is the WhatsApp Application. They can communicate and send pictures of their work to B2B and B2C clients. 85% of Artisans are using WhatsApp for Marketing and Business followed by Direct Telephone, Craft Platforms, Facebook, Instagram, and Website.

Various Craft Platforms allow artisans to connect with them. They help them to Market, Display, Ex-

hibit, and Sell their products to potential customers worldwide. 70% of the Artisans are connected with various Craft Platforms, whereas 30% find registering overwhelming.

As the nation proceeds towards un-lockdown phases and markets opening, the Artisans still reel under the uncertainty as 55% have received no orders or inquiry for their products, whereas 35% have received inquiries from the B2B market. The rest 10% have received new orders.

When we surveyed in terms of Business Plans and Marketing Strategies for coming times, a maximum of them is clueless. They do not possess the confidence to start afresh due to financial stress, the investment required for raw materials, no sales, and order quantity drastically reduced by B2B clients.

The new Marketing Strategies in times of low touch economy, being adopted by 10%, including developing their website, conducting workshops, connecting digitally with old and existing clients, customized products, making products useful for the crisis, low-cost products, and trying to tie up with E-commerce portals.

#### 3.1 Lessons from the study

A new marketing framework needs assistance for the artisans, which is easy to use due to a lack of education and communication skills. The revised marketing strategies should re-position the handmade and local products given the pandemic and post-pandemic situations. The Vocal campaigns for Local and Atmanirbhar Bharat, started by our Honorable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, should be seen as a positive sight by the artisans. The economic environment should be focused on, as Indian artisans must free themselves from financial crunches as soon as possible. The main issue they face is financial severity, which cannot be normalized without getting sales on track. The only solution is the various online platforms and marketplace that facilitate the quick exchange of goods and payments. The question is not about well-established artisans or organizations supporting them; it is about the small-scale artisans. The Ministry of Textiles - Government of India has not announced any scheme for the artisans. While various government-run enterprises sell their products, it is not feasible for all artisans to enroll themselves and follow their business guidelines.

Some strategies need to be adopted/well thought of for a smaller time duration, especially to keep the business and finance wheel moving like converting the

skills and designs of luxury craft products into essential products, understanding the economic environment, focus on changed consumer behavior, get acquainted with digital marketplaces and e-commerce, conduct virtual exhibitions as exhibitions are the primary source of income and emphasize on sustainability feature of crafts products. As the export market is unpredictable, the main focus should be the domestic market as it is easier for the supply chain.

A large part of the artisan community is unaware of technology and its uses. For women artisans, it is always convenient if they receive orders from small enterprises or designers as they receive training for their work, and completion is done in their home's comforts. If reaching out to each artisan is not realistic, artisan sahayog (help) centers can be set up in craft clusters to extend counseling in business and finance matters.

The community outreach programs or the local NGO can set up training modules to strengthen need-based guidance and skill development. As the larger chunk of income depends on B2B orders, institutional orders can be given to artisans for mass production; better pay rates and liquidates the piling inventory. The only way to bounce back and earn a fair amount of profit is large-scale orders.

The campaign of "Handmade in India," which was viral during the peak crisis time, was just a matter of copy-paste for the audience. The campaign emphasized Stand, Support and Demand for Handmade in India. While the message was to stand up for the second largest community in India, support the Indian traditions, contribute towards a green future, demand growth plans, equal economic policies, strengthen the local workforce, and long future of our cultural identity, it remained just a message. While it is effortless to spread the word through social platforms, it is disturbing to see the artisans' plight to suffer for their rights.

The pivotal marketing strategy is to first re-position products for the sudden change in the consumer market. While this strategy remains untouched for crisis times, it can be converted to a long-term strategy for the Artisan Community. While intricately crafted products remain a luxury, consumers will think about them as secondary or tertiary level purchases. These products can be created in low-cost segments by modifying a certain part of the product, thus not compromising its originality. As some products will continue to be uncertain or unnecessary investments, the challenge for artisans is the essential items are difficult to

produce, keeping in mind the quantity and process of manufacturing.

The craft platforms like Dastkari Haat Samiti, Dilli Haat, Paramparik Karigar, Gocoop Swadesi, and Amazon Kaarigar provide a conducive environment for artisan communities. They provide a significant amount of exposure to artisans whose crafts are unknown to the audience. The platforms also provide awareness in urban markets, promoting crafts through their mediums, history, and narratives of crafts and artisans, online, and exhibition sales. The only drawback of these platforms is the artisans do not know how to approach them. They find the application and business proposals tiresome sometimes. Some artisans find the profit earnings low and feel direct sales give them better opportunities. They need some handholding in this regard from the committees. They are aware of digital media and other platforms. However, lack of power to invest, educate and use has given them a backseat. To survive in tough times, their local community came to their aid, providing community loans, no interest personal loans, or personal property mortgage.

As the marketplace is still reeling under the pressure of the crisis, cancellation of occasions, events, and exhibitions, even the B2B market cannot provide a mass production order to them, making them shift to the B2C market where they are focusing on customized products to push their wheels.

The basic technology that is feasible and easy to use is the WhatsApp application which allows them to show their products by sending direct images to their consumers.

The younger generation of artisans is creating awareness for their community by learning and teaching digital mediums to their counterparts. They are aware that the future strategies have to be digitally compliant if they wish to survive in the marketplace. Many educational and technological institutions give them training and create platforms for them like exclusive websites and social media presence to reach consumers worldwide.

Exhibitions, trade shows, Melas are the easiest form of marketing Strategy the artisans use. It gives them the advantage of direct communication with their B2C clients. Here the entire responsibility of marketing, promotions, and reachability is with the organizers. Hence the artisans do not have to make efforts to create strategies for the market. Instead, they have to sell their products.



Individual artisans believe the craft platforms and eCommerce portals give more importance to established names or organizations, making it difficult for them to gain access and noticeability through these mediums. Also, a fixed percentage of commission is to be paid on the sales of their products to these portals, which hampers their profit earnings and makes their products expensive in consumers' perception.

As digital marketing strategies need a fixed-time investment or plan, it again becomes avoidable for the artisans as they are already in debt. Many artisans are unemployed or unoccupied, leading them to borrow community loans, mortgage their properties, sell their valuables, and sell personal belongings to survive. In this case, there should be a scheme for the tax benefit, zero-interest loans, subsidiary in raw materials, cheaper supply chain, and awareness advertisement campaigns for their community.

As intermediaries' problems exist in every business, the craft sector faces tight monetary involvement from all intermediaries and B2B traders. Suppose there is an exclusive category created for fiscal policies, laws of trade for artisans. In that case, they can emerge as a bigger player in the economic sector, not to forget their contribution to the huge exports percentage.

The marketing strategies require re-skilling of artisans, training, and development depending on the changing times. Many clusters create internal training programs, especially for women artisans, helping them come out of their cocoons of social factors and make a living for their families. If they are trained to market their products, surely there will be a bigger campaign that can be created.

The small scale of work does not give them the confidence to work on their business's marketing strategies. Marketing strategies require a systematic market network and accessibility between buyer and seller. Fortunately, due to digital payment emphasis and the digital economy, artisans have adapted to using digital modes of payments, making it easier for them to buy their products from any corner of the world.

When artisans use digital platforms of marketing, they face issues related to plagiarism and counterfeit products. Their created designs get copied by artisans who create the same product with synthetic materials at a lower cost, thus ruining the market with competition and tug of war of value proposition. The consumer feels cheated or misguided. They feel the same product is being sold for varied prices, thus creating the wrong

impression of original products. It takes a lot of effort, skills, and hard work to create each product as they are only handmade. The artisans are adopting a new marketing strategy to create their exclusive website, face updating the site regularly, and solve queries and payment details. They need training, technology, devices, the practice of doing this exercise. An obsolete website or non-updating of details makes the consumer lose interest in it. Artisans do not want their next generation to focus on practicing crafts but to focus on education as they have experienced financial problems and social unacceptance. However, fortunately, many families educate their next generation, but they join their occupation and help with the latest advancements.

Some crafts are synonymous with the place of origin. The tourism industry has played a major role in spreading its name globally. Some strong craft clusters in India have more than 8000 highly skilled artisans. Every household has members trained in the skill by their forefathers, which increases competition and deprives the original quality of craft as many artisans take the short cut paths for a business like the use of chemical dyes, low-quality raw materials, non-durable products, modification in the intricacy of designs thus reducing the cost considerably, which not only gives a setback to other artisans, it also creates a wrong perception in the minds of the consumer. Crafts passed on to as much as the 10th generation gives fame and monopoly to that family. Many artisans have converted themselves to small or medium-scale enterprises and employing several *kaarigars* under them. They raise the investments and qualify as micro-units. They have the advantage of attracting maximum business as traders and B2B markets find it more appealing. In this means, the small or individual artisan is completely banished out of this category. The main focal point of marketing strategies should be individual artisans.

## 4 Conclusions

Indian Artisans are the second largest community in India after farmers generating livelihood through their hand skills, deeply impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. The Indian artisans need succor in matters of finances as any crisis impacts their sector drastically, leading to loss of livelihood, no sales, and financial stress.

There have to be long-term policies to be created by the government under the Ministry of Textiles for the Indian Artisans to survive monetarily and business-wise. Craft clusters can be monitored under

various government schemes for handholding in crisis and otherwise. Lack of education and cognizance is a paramount issue for the community. Marketing strategies are a new normal for them as they are overwhelmed by the changing times. The only marketing strategy being adopted by them is the production of low-cost products. To create a window for marketing handicrafts products, digital marketers, lifestyle and fashion bloggers, or influencers should help artisans voluntarily, helping reach out to a wider audience, especially in urban areas, and create a strong demand as a lifestyle and fashion leaders are promoting it.

Many of them are changing their product range to smaller products, low price range, and digital or online promotion. Also, there is a change in positioning strategies based on the current situations. Many crafts are positioned as expensive and exclusive products like silk, pashmina wool, or jewels and gems related. They have been re-positioned not by changing their originality or value but by creating small or souvenir types of items, so consumers come forward and purchase. Since COVID-19 is an unprecedented event, the findings of this study are novel. They could be used by the entire artisan community, intermediaries, designers, and NGOs to develop a marketing framework. It could also help the government agencies to form policies relating to the marketing and selling of handicrafts in India.

### Ethical Clearance

Taken from Symbiosis Institute of Design, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, Maharashtra, Pune

### Source of Funding

Self

### Conflict of interest

Nil

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