

# Empowering Women Artisans of Himachal Pradesh India: Merging Traditional Crafts with Contemporary Design

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## ABSTRACT

The Himalayan region in India is known as a vibrant hub of artisanal traditions, particularly among women, various crafts such as weaving, knitting, and traditional footwear making have long been practiced and cherished for their cultural significance and economic importance. The SECURE (Securing livelihoods of high-range Himalayan Ecosystems) project, a collaborative initiative involving the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), UNDP, and funded by GEF, aimed to promote sustainable land and forest management in the High Range Indian Himalayan Ecosystems. The Lahaul-Pangi landscape in Himachal Pradesh, India, was selected for the project-traditional handicrafts based on wool were revitalized to support local women artisans. In Lahaul and Pangi region eleven villages were studied to identify artisans practicing weaving, knitting, and footwear-making as pivotal traditional crafts deeply rooted in the culture and economy of the communities of eleven villages in Himachal Pradesh. These crafts provided livelihoods but also contributed to the conservation of biodiversity by fostering sustainable practices in resource management. The main objective of the project was to enhance the capacities of the women artisans in the communities. The collaboration created a platform for artisans and designers to work on the same platform. NIFT conducted workshops with master artisans aiming to enhance the value of traditional products through design innovation and skill enhancement. The artisans were skilled and practiced the craft for generations. On the other hand, the design team from NIFT knew the fashion trends and products that work for the market. These workshops introduced new techniques such as vegetable dyeing of wool and the integration of contemporary designs with traditional motifs. Such interventions not only preserved cultural heritage but also increased the market appeal and commercial viability of the artisans' products. The project recognised the challenges faced by artisans residing in remote villages, particularly the limited exposure to urban markets and modern technologies. To address this, the project identified Master Artisans from each village for advanced training. These women artisans needed exposure to participate in national and international fairs, thereby expanding their market access and ensuring sustainable income opportunities. Before the field visits, data was

collected through surveys and in-depth interviews. Moreover, the project established a comprehensive database of artisans, which was shared with relevant government agencies. This initiative aimed to connect artisans with ongoing and future government schemes, ensuring continuous support beyond the project's duration. By facilitating access to training programs and market opportunities, the project not only empowered individual artisans but also strengthened community resilience and fostered economic growth in the region.

**Keywords:** Design Himachal Pradesh Artisan Wool Craft

## **INTRODUCTION**

Lahaul- Pangi Region is situated in the state Himachal Pradesh in Northern part of India, known for its unique culture, landscapes, and biodiversity. The region is known for traditional handicrafts, particularly those made from wool. Wool-based crafts like weaving, knitting, and carpet making are integral to the economy, with women artisans playing a key role in the production of these crafts. These products are also a source of income, especially through the sale of woollen garments, carpets, and shawls.

The Securing Livelihoods, Conservation, Sustainable Use, and Restoration of High-Range Himalayan Ecosystems (SECURE) project is a collaborative initiative implemented by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) in partnership with UNDP and funded by GEF. This project aims to support the Government of India and state governments in fostering sustainable land and forest management practices in the alpine pastures and forests of the High-Range Indian Himalayan Ecosystems. The overarching goal is to secure sustainable livelihoods, conserve globally significant biodiversity, and protect threatened species in these regions.

A key outcome of the project is the development of improved and diversified livelihood strategies, alongside building the capacities of communities and government institutions for sustainable natural resource management. As part of the state-level livelihood strategy tailored for the Lahaul-Pangi landscape in Himachal Pradesh, the revival of wool-based traditional handicrafts has been identified as a crucial component.

The National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), based in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, plays a pivotal role in this initiative. Established near the Lahaul-Pangi landscape, NIFT has a long-standing history of working with craft clusters at the national level. The institute's expertise in design intervention, technology, and management positions it as a valuable partner in enhancing the outcomes of the SECURE project.

By leveraging NIFT's design expertise, the project aims to create innovative solutions that empower the women artisans and strengthen the economic and ecological resilience of the region. The community members in both Lahaul and Pangi are skilled in making handicrafts items.

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## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research studies carried in the same region examines the potential for revitalising traditional wool-based crafts in the Lahaul-Pangi region of Himachal Pradesh, including the role of local artisans and the socio-economic impacts of these crafts. (Sharma, Jena & Chandra, 2021), in their research work focuses on the challenges faced by artisans, such as limited market access and a lack of modern design inputs, and suggests that integrating design interventions could help preserve and promote these crafts. (Sharma, Jena & Chandra, 2021) in another research paper explores the socio-economic conditions of handloom weavers in Himachal Pradesh, identifying issues like poor earnings, high yarn prices, lack of government support, and the decline in handloom weaving due to competition from mechanised sectors. They focus on the economic, social, and market-related difficulties artisans face, as well as potential strategies for revitalisation and sustainable development.

Some research papers focusing on design interventions and sustainable livelihoods in the Himalayan region mentions that how design strategies, particularly in product development and branding, contribute to sustainable livelihoods in rural Himalayan regions, focusing on local crafts. (Dash & Mishra, 2021) in their research paper mentioned that the artisan was an important factor in the equation of the Indian society and culture. It is the artisans who actually develop handicrafts. The nimble fingers of the craftsmen turned every article they touched into a thing of joy. Visual manifestations of a millennium of Indian culture, these arts and crafts embody and reflect a tradition, which still lives in the creative imagination and skill of the artisans. Most of the designs, forms and colours employed by them have evolved slowly through the disciplined efforts of generations of craftsmen. India being a land of villages with more than two-

thirds of her population living in rural areas, rural industrialisation could play a key role in the country as it produces forward and backward linkages in the rural economy. In this context, the Rural Small Scale Enterprises (RSSEs) based on local raw materials, skills and technology have been identified as one of the key sectors in the country. From the choice of the raw materials to the final finishing touch, at every stage, craftsmen had to adhere to set standards with almost ritualistic precision. These papers delve into the impact of design and innovation on the livelihood of artisans and the sustainable development of crafts in the Himalayan region. In analyzing the research on handicraft artisans in rural and remote regions, many studies emphasize aspects like socio-economic issues, cultural preservation, and design interventions, but none specifically focus on the methodologies or research planning for exploring these areas. For example, while studies such as Dash and Mishra (2021) on handicraft artisans offer insights into the challenges faced by artisans, they do not delve into how research in remote areas can be systematically planned or carried out, especially in inaccessible regions like the Himalayas.

Existing studies, focus on design interventions and the socio-economic role of traditional crafts in Himalayan regions. However, these papers generally assume access to existing data or established research infrastructure, which may not apply to extremely remote locations where physical infrastructure, reliable transportation, and even basic data collection systems are absent. A key research gap here is the lack of structured methodologies for conducting research in such inaccessible and less-explored areas. This includes how to adapt data collection methods to account for isolation, limited access, and absence of detailed demographic data, all of which are common challenges in high-altitude and isolated regions. Moreover, no previous studies address the process of creating a database for artisans or the specific challenges of reaching out to these communities, which has proven to be a significant hurdle in research planning for such areas.

In addition to the challenges of research planning in remote areas, another significant gap in the literature is the lack of data on the openness of artisans working with traditional designs to adapt and collaborate with designers. While many studies have explored the socio-economic impact of traditional crafts in the Himalayan region, there is limited exploration on how artisans are prepared to engage with new design innovations or adapt their traditional crafts to meet contemporary market demands.

## **GAP IDENTIFIED IN RESEARCH**

The research conducted in the Lahaul-Pangi region aimed to address significant gaps.

### **Isolation**

The Lahaul-Pangi region, located in the remote northern part of Himachal Pradesh, is surrounded by rugged mountain ranges, making it extremely difficult to access. This

geographical isolation presents several challenges:

- **Difficult Accessibility:** Much of the region is cut off during the winter months due to heavy snowfall, with key mountain passes, including the Rohtang Pass, being blocked. The only access routes remain open during the summer, limiting year-round connectivity.
- **Limited Infrastructure:** Many villages in the Lahaul-Pangi region lack basic infrastructure, such as roads, making transportation and access to essential services like healthcare, education, and markets very challenging. Many of the villages did not have proper infrastructure for conducting trainings. This isolation severely restricts development opportunities and the mobility of the local population.

### **Lack of Data and Research on Artisans**

Before initiating the research, one of the major challenges identified was the absence of a comprehensive artisan database in the region. The lack of available data made it difficult to understand the socio-economic status, practices, and needs of local artisans.

- **Limited Research:** The Lahaul-Pangi region has seen minimal research related to its artisan communities, with little documented information on the traditional crafts and livelihoods of the people. As a result, it was hard to assess the scale and significance of handicrafts in the local economy and culture.

### **Artisan Adaptability to New Design Interventions**

This gap is particularly relevant in isolated regions like the Himalayas, where artisans may have limited exposure to external design trends or market dynamics. There is a need for research that examines how ready and adaptable artisans are to incorporate modern design techniques while maintaining cultural authenticity. Understanding their openness to working with designers, embracing new materials, and altering traditional designs for contemporary markets is crucial for developing sustainable, culturally sensitive design interventions. Addressing this research gap would enable more effective and mutually beneficial collaborations between traditional artisans and designers, fostering both craft preservation and market viability.

These challenges significantly hindered initial efforts to collect data and research in the Lahaul-Pangi region. However, through structured surveys and focused data collection efforts, these gaps are gradually being addressed, contributing to a better understanding of the local artisan community and their needs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Data was collected in various phases, eleven villages were selected namely- Udaipur, Tindi, Tingret, Sechu, Sural, Sarch, Dharwas, Karyas, Killar, Kumar & Purthi. This methodological approach allows for a deep understanding of artisan needs and lays

the groundwork for sustainable interventions to enhance livelihoods and promote the conservation of cultural heritage in the Lahaul-Pangi region.

The sample consisted of artisans from the Lahaul-Pangi region, with a particular focus on women artisans engaged in wool-based handicrafts, particularly knitting. The survey was administered through structured interviews conducted by NIFT Team along with local volunteers, ensuring ease of communication and familiarity with the community.

For the data collection research was conducted in various phases like i) Preliminary studies & Survey. ii) Conducting Design workshop for design intervention with Master artisans. iii) Intensive training programmes for women artisans in the project villages.

### **Preliminary studies & Survey**

The preliminary studies and observations from initial visits helped in finalising the final survey questionnaire. A detailed analysis of responses from the pilot survey was conducted, which provided valuable insights into the artisan community's needs, challenges, and aspirations. This helped in refining the survey for a larger-scale data collection across 11 villages in the Lahaul-Pangi region.

### **Conducting Design workshop for design intervention with Master artisans**

A Design workshop was conducted by team of designers from National Institute of Fashion Technology and artisans of the region, both online and offline mode at NIFT, Campus, Kangra. The Design workshop held at NIFT, Kangra campus helped in understanding the crafts of region in terms of raw materials and designs, prior to the field visits. The artisans were also invited to NIFT campus for exposure workshops, demonstration workshops, exhibitions and craft bazaars where they get an opportunity to interact with the craft experts, upgrade their product and design knowledge and understand consumers in the urban markets. Masters artisans from Lahaul & Pangi Region were invited in NIFT, Centre. Travel, stay food & remuneration were arranged. Young design students of NIFT were sensitised towards artisans of Lahaul & Pangi.

### **Field visits & training programme**

NIFT Team travelled in all the remote project villages. Training programmes were conducted on use of domestic knitting machines, natural dyeing, creating designs as per global trend and forecast. Head of the Villages were approached to encourage local women to join the workshop. This also helped the team in creating database of the women artisans. Also the team were able to identify skilled women in knitting, weaving or making of traditional footwear.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Survey Findings on Artisan Practices and Needs

The survey conducted across 11 villages in the Lahaul-Pangi region provides critical insights into the practices, experiences, and aspirations of the artisans. The findings highlight:

- i. Types of craft associated with: 84% are associated with knitting as craft, 12 % with weaving and 2% for both knitting and weaving.
- ii. Number of years the crafts is practised in the family: 66% are associated for 10-25 years, 18 for 25- 50 years and 12 % for 5-10 years
- iii. Raw material exploration: 80% denied any kind of exploration with new raw material other than the traditional products. 72% answered that the new products are more profitable than the old ones.
- iv. Interest in areas that can strengthen their growth: 30% expressed interest in design, 30% in marketing, 18% in packaging
- v. 80% did not have any recent training for the upgradation of skills; however they admitted that trainings are beneficial for them in the long run and for better opportunities. 92% of them expressed their interest in getting training.
- vi. Training areas: 46% wanted training on better quality, 26% on design innovation , 12% on skill building.

### Traditional Crafts of Lahual - Pangi

As per the pilot survey conducted in the Lahual-Pangi region, mutual interactions, observations and discussion with the artisans of the Landscape it was found that knitting is the most popular and widespread craft of Lahaul and Pangi. The women have been practicing knitting as their traditional craft and practised from many generations. All women in every house of the region practice knitting and make sweaters, socks and gloves because Lahaul-Pangi is a very cold region with snow and low temperatures. but now with various organisations and help from the government, knitting is now also means of income and a business opportunity for the people in the region. Even though the major livelihood comes from agricultural practices, the women of Lahaul are the ones who are involved in the knitting.

Every craft has unique usage of tools, materials and processes and it is pertinent to gain knowledge about them for incorporation of any changes or interventions as the objective of the same is also preservation of the traditional elements. With the help of the virtual interviews and of the artisans, information was gathered about the technique and process of the making craft.

**Yarns:** The traditional raw materials include woollens yarns obtained from sheep and yak. Women use hand knitting needles for knitting.

## Design elements:

### Colours

The colours the yarns of Lahaul can be divided into two categories of wool natural and manmade.

*Natural based-* since this wool is acquired from the hair of sheep and yak, it has more neutral colours such as grey, rust and brown.



**Fig 1.** Traditional Woollen Products(socks & gloves)

*Manmade /Dyed-* Acrylic yarn is used now a days for knitting. Mostly at a maximum seven colours are used in one product. Generally, the colours are- green, white, black, pink, yellow, orange and blue.

*Motifs-* Few names of motifs documented during the field visit were -Ghera Chakri, Leheria, Gau. There is need of documentation of traditional motifs. The NIFT Design team has specially incorporated the traditional designs in design intervention workshops for making contemporary products.

### Design intervention in woollen products

Training session on Design Intervention workshop was conducted prior to visit of field studies at NIFT Campus Kangra with Master Artisans. Identification & study of traditional craft is important as to incorporate the appropriate interventions maintaining the traditional elements of the crafts was the approach that was followed during these workshops. The workshops were helped the NIFT Team to understand the traditional designs and come up with design ideas. This also helped the NIFT team to training programs for the 11 villages later during the field visits.

Practical demonstration were given by the NIFT design team on the usage of natural

dyeing, new product development, and colour combinations that can be used to make the contemporary products. The women artisans were encouraged to make new products as per trend and demands of global market. The artisans used traditional motifs with new contemporary colours and created products like cushion covers, bottle cover, jackets, shoes and children's wear.



**Fig 2.** Design Interventions- Cushion covers with traditional motifs

### **Empowering Women Artisans**

The project team reached out to the local community members in person and imparted awareness about the content of the training modules in 11 villages. Training programmes were designed by the NIFT Team on Design intervention & Digital marketing.

Motivating the local community to attend and benefit from these training programs was another colossal task executed by project team persistently. The project also identified various Self Help Groups working with the artisans. Observe how they are willing to adapt new designs and new products and identify challenges they are facing in developing products (health, material or supply of raw material, production, marketing etc).

Women artisans on completion of the workshop were awarded certificates. Total number 121 women artisans completed the workshop successfully. Women in the 11 villages found these workshops very enriching and they acknowledged the benefits of going through updated knowledge that can help them to sell better products in the market. It provided them an opportunity to learn something new, and a way for income generation. Many women expressed their gratitude for flexibility of timings as these workshops were planned according to their availability. As the women were busy with

agriculture activities, The NIFT field visiting team conducted workshops in the evening and night in few villages. The team also facilitated selected artisans to take part in local and national fairs on handicrafts. The new products developed the women were sold with better prices.



**Fig 3.** Women Artisans learning to uses knitting machine during the work shop

Facilitating artisan participation in local and national handicraft fairs has been particularly impactful. It provided artisans with direct market access, enabling them to sell their newly developed products at better prices and gain recognition for their craftsmanship. This experience boosted their confidence and affirmed the commercial value of combining traditional motifs with modern design elements. Many women artisans expressed a newfound eagerness to experiment with innovative techniques and were confident in their ability to create contemporary products that appeal to broader markets, blending creativity with cultural integrity.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research highlights the significant potential of design interventions in revitalising traditional crafts and enhancing the livelihoods of women artisans in the Lahaul-Pangi region of Himachal Pradesh. Through targeted skill-development workshops, exposure to new techniques, and collaborative design processes, the initiative has successfully bridged the gap between cultural heritage and contemporary market demands.

The study also addresses critical challenges such as geographical isolation, limited infrastructure, and the artisans' adaptability to new approaches. The findings reveal that with proper training and exposure, artisans show remarkable readiness to

innovate while preserving their cultural identity. This adaptability is pivotal for the sustainable growth of traditional crafts in remote regions.

Overall, this research demonstrates how culturally sensitive, collaborative design interventions can empower artisan communities, preserve intangible heritage, and create sustainable economic opportunities. Future initiatives should build on these successes, focusing on scaling market linkages, fostering long-term collaborations, and developing infrastructure to further strengthen the resilience of artisan communities in remote Himalayan regions. The research underscores the transformative potential of community-centered design interventions in empowering local artisans. By learning with local communities and centering their voices, such approaches contribute to rethinking and reshaping design ideals while preserving cultural authenticity

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