



Research Paper

Cultural Craft and Economic Resilience: A Case Study of Chura and Kaleera Artisans in Punjab

Prisha Goel

Research Scholar, The Millennium School, Amritsar

Abstract

This research paper examines the socio-economic dynamics of traditional chura (bridal bangle) and kaleera (ceremonial ornament) artisans in Punjab, India. Despite enduring cultural relevance within Punjabi wedding traditions, these craft communities face multifaceted economic vulnerabilities rooted in informal market structures, declining intergenerational craft transfer and limited access to formal and digital markets. Drawing on qualitative field engagement from Project Kalai, this study employs a case study methodology to explore how cultural significance intersects with labour precarity, market exclusion and digital divide. Findings indicate that while ritual demand for these crafts persists, artisans remain constrained by intermediary dependencies, weak institutional support and exclusion from digital platforms that could expand market reach — reinforcing socio-economic marginality. The paper theorizes these patterns within frameworks of informal economies and cultural capital, and suggests integrated policy interventions encompassing cultural tourism, digital inclusion, and value chain restructuring to foster sustainable livelihoods. This work contributes to scholarship on cultural economies and rural development by providing a context-specific analysis of an under-documented craft sector.

Keywords: chura, kaleera, cultural heritage, artisan livelihoods, informal economy, digital exclusion, Punjab

I. Introduction

Traditional crafts represent a vital dimension of India's cultural economy, embedding aesthetic, ritual, and social meanings while sustaining millions of rural livelihoods. Handicrafts in India collectively support vast populations across generations, often operating within predominantly informal and unregistered economic structures, with women comprising a significant proportion of artisanal labour. Within this broad landscape, Punjabi wedding crafts such as *chura* and *kaleera* assume a distinct socio-cultural position: they are obligatory components of customary marriage rites, laden with symbolic meanings of marital blessings, identity and community continuity.

However, cultural prominence does not equate with economic security. Empirical and policy literature highlights persistent challenges faced by traditional artisans, including limited formal market access, intermediary-mediated trade practices, and competitive pressures from mass-produced alternatives. Furthermore, the acceleration of digital platforms as market channels has created new opportunities and new exclusionary pressures, particularly for rural artisans lacking digital literacy, connectivity and infrastructural support.

This paper focuses specifically on the *chura* and *kaleera* artisan community in Punjab to investigate how cultural significance interplays with structural economic barriers. It explores three central questions: (a) How do cultural practices shape the economic lives of artisans? (b) What structural factors constrain artisans' economic agency within informal markets? and (c) How does limited access to digital platforms reinforce economic marginalization?

II. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Crafts as Economic and Symbolic Systems

Traditional crafts operate both as cultural artifacts and economic products. Scholars of cultural economics argue that crafts embody a dual identity: they convey symbolic cultural meaning while participating in market transactions. This duality often generates tensions between preservation and commodification when artisans engage with broader markets (Sharma, 2024). In India, caste- and gender-linked artisanal traditions persist as carriers of cultural memory, yet modern economic pressures frequently diminish their material viability.

Wedding specific crafts occupy an interesting niche: they remain culturally indispensable within ritual economies while facing competition from industrial substitutes. This tension echoes broader findings that heritage crafts can persist symbolically even as they lose economic traction.

2.2 Informal Economy and Artisan Market Structures

Artisan sectors in India largely function outside formal institutional frameworks, characterized by reliance on intermediaries, absence of formal contracts, and market price asymmetries that favour buyers and wholesalers. Das (2011) highlights how rural craft sectors have suffered adverse impacts from economic liberalization, with machine-made goods eroding the market value of handmade products and younger generations abandoning ancestral trades. This resonates with broader socio-economic analyses of informal economies where workers often lack bargaining power, social protections, and access to capital.

2.3 Digital Exclusion in the Handicraft Sector

Digital platforms such as Amazon Karigar and Flipkart Samarth have been identified as potential enablers of market access for artisans who can navigate online spaces, offering direct connections to national and international buyers that reduce dependence on middlemen. However, scholars note significant barriers to digital participation: limited access to smartphones and internet, low digital literacy, and linguistic constraints that disproportionately affect rural artisans stranded in producer-only markets. Thus, digital exclusion operates not merely as lack of technology but as structural marginality.

2.4 Cultural Tourism and Craft Revitalization

Research on linking crafts with tourism posits that cultural tourism can generate demand for heritage products while fostering place-based development (Singh & Sharma, 2025). Craft villages and tourism circuits exemplify this potential; for example, initiatives in Bagh block printing aim to empower artisans by integrating live demonstrations with tourism, bridging heritage preservation and economic opportunity. However, the translation of tourism demand into sustainable livelihoods requires intentional design to avoid superficial commodification that displaces artisan agency.

III. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, enabling an in-depth examination of artisan experiences and market dynamics. Case study methodology is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena embedded in specific cultural contexts.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data was gathered through prolonged field engagement with *chura* and *kaleera* artisans under Project Kalai, involving semi-structured conversations and observational insights within artisan communities and local markets in Punjab. These interactions focused on artisanal practices, market relations, income strategies, and perceptions of technological engagement. Secondary literature from academic journals, policy documents and industry analyses provided triangulation and contextual grounding.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is guided by theories of informal economies and cultural capital, situating artisan economic agency within broader socio-economic structures and power relations. Digital exclusion is conceptualized not only as lack of access to platforms but as a structural constraint intersecting with class, geography and education.

IV. Findings

4.1 Ritual Embeddedness and Economic Imperatives

Chura and *kaleera*, though deeply anchored in Punjabi wedding traditions, operate within seasonal cycles of demand, with peak periods around marriage seasons and festivals. Artisans describe steady cultural demand but note that income fluctuates sharply across the year. The ritual importance sustains relevance but does not ensure stable livelihoods.

Observational insight: Production practices remain largely manual, with limited mechanization. Artisans often work in home-based units, relying on family labour and traditional techniques passed down generations.

4.2 Intermediary Dependency and Value Capture

Artisans ubiquitously reported dependence on intermediaries, local wholesalers and retail agents, who negotiate sales in urban markets including wedding bazaars and ethnic trade fairs. These intermediaries typically determine pricing, resulting in compressed profit margins for producers.

Field insight: Despite high consumer expenditures on wedding products overall, the share retained by artisans is disproportionately small. This mirrors findings in broader artisan contexts where informal value chains skew economic benefits toward intermediaries.

4.3 Digital Exclusion as Reinforced Marginality

Across interactions, artisans expressed awareness of digital platforms yet identified barriers to participation, including:

- Limited digital literacy (particularly in online marketing and payments)
- Lack of access to reliable internet and smartphones
- Linguistic constraints in platform interfaces

These barriers hinder artisans from leveraging online marketplaces that could expand their reach beyond local buyers. This reflects broader patterns of digital inequality in rural artisan sectors, where platform participation is uneven and contingent on external support.

4.4 Intergenerational Craft Continuity at Risk

Many elder artisans noted a decline in younger generation participation due to economic uncertainty, with youth opting for alternative livelihoods. This trend imperils the transmission of artisanal knowledge and risks attrition of craft traditions unless economic viability improves.

V. Discussion

The findings elucidate a paradox: cultural significance does not translate into economic agency for artisans. Traditional crafts persist as cultural symbols while remaining marginalized in value capture. This aligns with informal economy theory, which posits that cultural labour often goes unrecognized in formal economic metrics.

Digital exclusion emerges as a layered constraint — not merely a technological gap but a structural one that intersects with education, geography and economic capital. Without targeted interventions, digital platforms will continue to benefit only a minority of artisans who have resources and literacy to engage with them.

Integrating *chura* and *kaleera* craft economies into cultural tourism strategies (modeled after initiatives like craft villages) can enhance visibility and demand but must be coupled with mechanisms that ensure artisans retain control over narratives, pricing and production standards. Additionally, policy support through targeted digital literacy programs, access to shared infrastructure and inclusion in formal artisan support schemes can enhance economic resilience.

VI. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *chura* and *kaleera* artisans in Punjab face lasting economic challenges despite enduring cultural demand for their products. Structural factors — including intermediary-dominated value chains and digital exclusion — curtail economic opportunity while posing risks to craft continuity. Enhancing artisan livelihoods requires integrated strategies that bridge cultural heritage preservation with economic empowerment through digital and tourism-linked pathways. This research contributes context-specific insights to scholarship on artisan livelihoods, cultural economies, and rural development.

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